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SOCIETY



Jonny Stacks at Architectural Artifacts

About Face Theatre Wonka Ball: Circus Maximus

When: 8 p.m. Friday, April 26
Where: Architectural Artifacts, 4325 N. Ravenswood Ave., Chicago
How much: \$135 for gala; \$235 for 7 p.m. VIP cocktail party and gala
Dress code: "Chic to over-the-top"
Expected attendance: 400
Expected gross: \$90,000
Tickets and more info: 773-784-8565; AboutFaceTheatre.com

MORE EVENTS THIS WEEK:

Ounce of Prevention annual luncheon, April 24, 11:30 a.m., Hilton Chicago, 720 S. Michigan Ave., 312-922-3863 OunceOfPrevention.org/luncheon
Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago Women's Board, April 25, 5:30 p.m., Merchandise Mart International Antiques Fair Private Preview Party, Merchandise Mart, 312-238-6023 RIC.org
Writers' Theatre Wordplay Gala 2013, April 27, 6:30 p.m., Four Seasons Hotel Chicago, 120 E. Delaware Place, 847-242-6012 WritersTheatre.org/gala
Roger Baldwin Foundation of ACLU of Illinois 44th Annual Bill of Rights Celebration, April 27, 6 p.m., Westin River North, 320 N. Dearborn St., 312-201-9740 ACLU-IL.org
American Cancer Society Discovery Ball, April 27, 5:30 p.m., Radisson Blu Aqua Hotel, 221 N. Columbus Drive, 312-279-7213 DiscoveryBall.org

Something different

About Face Theatre has hosted a "prom" at Chicago Illuminating Company, a former power plant turned party space in the South Loop. It's held a "royal wedding" at School of the Art Institute's ballroom on South Michigan Avenue. This year, its annual Wonka Ball will be themed Circus Maximus, and it will take place April 26 at another alternative party spot, Architectural Artifacts, the antiques and architectural elements store in Ravenswood.

That space's soaring ceilings, multiple levels and jumble of memorabilia, including a carousel and a giant Poppy's Cut Rate Liquors sign, make it the ideal party spot for About Face's donors, says Jonny Stacks, interim executive director. "Our people are more urban adventurers, so going to a hotel isn't as appealing," he says.

Many of the city's fundraising galas take place at hotels or at the home of the organization sponsoring the gala. Smaller nonprofits such as About Face, which stages plays that address gender and sexual identity and has a \$650,000 annual budget, like to host donors in alternative venues. The city's collection of such spaces includes Architectural Artifacts, Venue One, Salvage One, Chicago Illuminating Company and even the museums that rent out their space for parties (and a revenue stream). Event planners say these venues offer more room for creativity and a younger, more energetic vibe than hotels.

That creativity and vibe come with a

price tag. While hotels offer pricing covering everything from renting the space to building out the dance floor, events in alternative spaces usually are a la carte affairs, requiring a nonprofit to bring in caterers, audiovisual help, tables, chairs and wineglasses, not to mention coat check staff and valet parkers.

The higher cost means a lower net. Mr. Stacks expects Wonka Ball to gross \$90,000 and net \$65,000, putting the event's cost at 28 percent of gross, just shy of the 30 percent fundraising experts say should be the maximum cost for galas.

Mr. Stacks says he's "comfortable" with Wonka Ball's costs and adds that Architectural Artifacts' event coordinator persuaded a local company to donate desserts and rounded up a few silent-auction items to help make the gala a financial success.

Alternative spaces are "more work—more things need to be brought in," says Marina Birch, principal at Birch Design Studio Ltd., a Chicago-based event planner. Hotels have staging areas, podiums, glassware and other gala necessities, but at alternative spaces, "you have to bring all that in 90 percent of the time," Ms. Birch says. "It's a greater expense, and your list of things to do just got longer."

"They're sort of expensive places to have galas," agrees Ann Marie Arzt, president of EventScape Inc., a Barrington-based event planner. Ms. Arzt is the event planner for the Alzheimer's Association Chicago Rita Hayworth Gala on May 11 at the Hilton

Chicago. The event has been held at other alternative venues, including the Field Museum and Civic Opera House, "but it got expensive," Ms. Arzt says. "At the opera house, we had to pay to build out the stage," she says, adding "we felt it was time to move to a hotel."

For some organizations, logistics dictate the venue. Steppenwolf Theatre Company's May 4 gala takes place at Blackhawk on Halsted, an event space about two blocks south of the theater. The gala begins with a performance at Steppenwolf's home, so transporting guests from the performance to the dinner is easier than getting them to a downtown hotel.

Rick Stoneham, a former About Face board member, attends galas at both hotels and alternative spaces. "There's a different energy, usually a more youthful energy," at nontraditional spaces, says Mr. Stoneham, 56, senior vice president in the Chicago office of JPMorgan Chase & Co. "There's generally more of an artistic, younger crowd and a little more on the creative side."

A member of several nonprofit boards, including Den Theatre and Center on Halsted, Mr. Stoneham says alternative spots can produce a financially successful gala. "A lot of organizations get their food and liquor donated, and the entertainment is artists and actors who volunteer their time," he says. "It depends on how organized they are."

He can't see About Face doing a circus or prom at the Four Seasons. "To bring someone from About Face to a hotel-type deal—I'm not sure how well that would do," he says. "It's a younger crowd that wants to have more fun, more of a cocktail party."



LISA BERTAGNOLI

Social Whirl

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