

Wednesday, October 8, 2014

REO bravado

Lansing's fastest growing cultural district gets a new performing arts space

by ALLAN I. ROSS



For the last three years, Dylan and Jeana- Dee Rogers have been artistic dynamos in the community. He's the founder/bandleader of the Lansing Unionized Vaudeville Spectacle, an eye-popping 16-piece gypsy-folk group that play concerts and festivals throughout mid-Michigan. She's the education director at REACH Art Studio, which works with schools, neighborhood organizations and businesses to keep visual art front-and-center in mid-Michigan.

"We're cheerleaders of Lansing," Dylan Rogers said. "But there is a ton of talent here that doesn't always get seen."

The two have invested their time, money and made themselves homeless (more on that later) to create the Robin Theatre, a new performing arts space they're developing in REO Town. Situated in the heart of the growing historic district, the Robin is designed to host concerts, theater performances, spoken word acts, poetry events and whatever else the local creative class can cook up.

"(REO Town) used to be a very blue collar area, and it's very interesting to see this artistic community moving in and making it their own," Rogers said. "It's a great place to get something like this started."

The Rogerses will provide a sneak peak of their new 1,600-square-foot digs at an event Saturday called (deep breath) REO Town Welcomes the Robin Theatre Presenting: The Lansing Unionized Vaudeville Spectacle Album Release Party. This isn't a grand opening for the building — the Robin won't officially open until next August — but a chance for curiosity seekers to see what's been going in there for the last few months.

"And maybe get people to start talking," Rogers says coyly. "I think it will be very well received when people start to discover it."

Saturday's event will include an hourlong performance by the Lansing Unionized Vaudeville Spectacle playing songs off its new album, "Dream Machine." The concert will be bookended by two half-hour comedy/music segments including puppets, belly dancers and choreographed pieces. There will be two performances that night, at 6:30 and 9. That Rogers is both bandleader and building owner has caused some confusion, however.

"This is not the LUVS Theater — it's not just for our band," he said. "The Robin is for everyone."

The space is intimate — it can only accommodate 150 seats — but Rogers sees it as a vital component of the performing arts scene.

"For local performers, there's a lack of variation in venues," he said. "You can't play at Mac's every night. It's a great place — so's the Green Door, so's the Loft — but this is an alternative to those. This is going to be a dignified setting. It's not for big crowds."

And unlike the other venues in town, it won't be open nightly, or even weekly. The building will also double as the couple's home — they will live in the apartment upstairs — which probably plays into their decision to limit performances. How do you shush the neighbors when you're the one who booked them?

Earlier this year they put their house near Sparrow Hospital up for sale after doing some preliminary research on the REO Town building. They thought their home would take a while to sell, but they got an offer almost immediately from a couple looking to retire in Lansing. They got their asking price, but they had to be out within a month. The deal with the Robin Theatre wasn't even complete yet and would still require months of work before it was habitable. But they took a chance, sold the house and have been couch surfing with friends ever since. They expect to move in by December.

"Life is weird right now," Rogers said. "But that's what it's like when you're chasing down a dream. It's going to take a ton of work, and I hope it's going to pay off. But we count on nothing but the blood, sweat and tears. It's a very Lansing ethic."

In June 2013, Rogers and his band rented an RV and headed out on a tour of breweries and classic performance halls in West Michigan and the Upper Peninsula. The trip was supposed to result in a documentary, but Rogers said that probably won't happen now. (He wouldn't elaborate, citing ongoing talks with the film's producer/director.) The movie may be a bust, but it challenged the band to hone its visual style, some of which worked its way into the new album's material.

"We've really focused on our songwriting and musicianship for this album," Rogers said. "It's a little weirder, but I think it's the best work we've ever done. We've done stuff like written songs with the shadow puppets in mind. But we are a band that brings theatrical elements as opposed to a variety show.

We've had to come to terms with that."

Rogers' feathers don't seem too ruffled about keeping all his eggs in one nest.

"We've got no money, but we're working hard and making the most of what we've got, including accepting lots of help from friends," Rogers said. "It's just part of the unguaranteed life of a performing artist."

To hear tracks off "Dream Machine," visit the Lansing Unionized Vaudeville Spectacle's Facebook page or its website, 517luvs.com.

REO Town Welcomes the Robin Theatre Presenting: The Lansing Unionized Vaudeville Spectacle Album Release Party

6:30 p.m. & 9 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 11 1105 S. Washington Ave., Lansing \$15/\$10 adv. 517luvs.com

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