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## Fashioning an arts haven

Garment district is becoming enclave for theatre, dance; space, rents are lure

BY AMANDA FUNG

LATE LAST MONTH, the Pearl Theatre Company packed up its files and bags of elaborate costumes and moved to new 4,300-square-foot digs on West 38th Street. It's the first time that the 25-year-old group, formerly spread out in two locations in the East Village and Lower East Side, will have a single Manhattan headquarters with a dedicated rehearsal space—in the heart of the garment district.

"The neighborhood in general is becoming a great central location for arts groups," says Shira Beckerman, managing director of the Pearl Theatre, which is currently staging Bernard Shaw's giddy comedy *Misalliance*. "I am excited about the neighbors we have in the area."

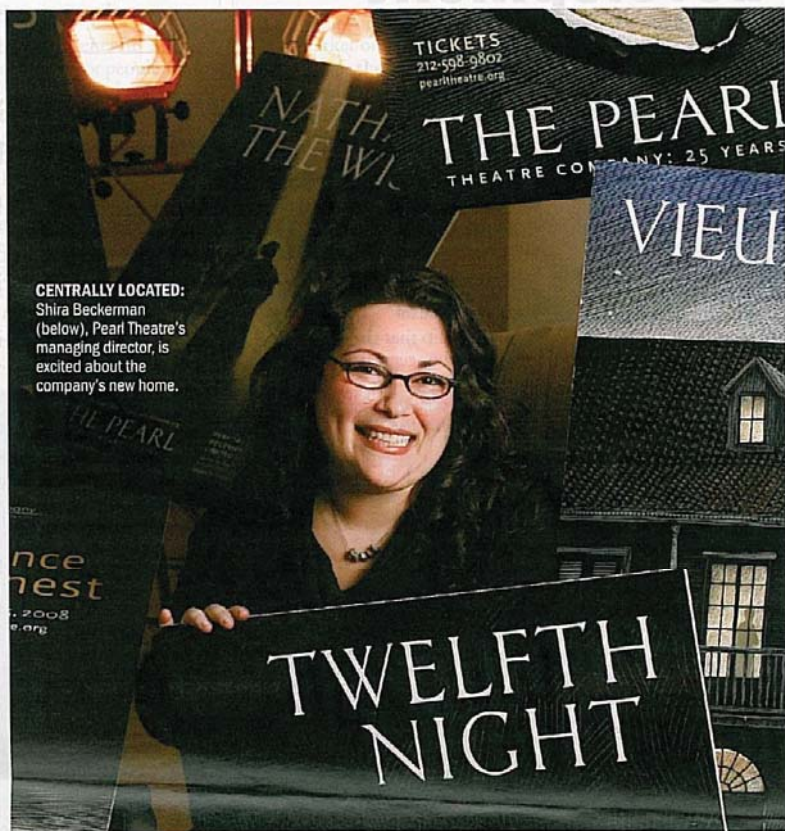
The theater company is just the latest to make the neighborhood, once primarily known for fashion design and manufacturing, a haven for arts and culture. In the midst of the recession, these groups, which come from all parts of Manhattan, are looking for cheaper space and proximity to one another as the area becomes a thriving arts enclave.

There are at least 150 arts-related groups in the area, including 20 performing arts groups, a dozen artists and 16 art galleries, according to the Fashion Center Business Improvement District. Among those who recently pitched a tent or extended their presence there are the Theatre Development Fund, the Baryshnikov Arts Center and the Joyce Theater Foundation.

### Proximity to Broadway, off-Broadway

"RENTS IN THE GARMENT DISTRICT have always been lower than just about anywhere else in Manhattan," says Jonathan Denham, a principal at real estate firm Denham Wolf, who has helped at least half a dozen arts groups, including the Pearl Theatre, move into the neighborhood.

Currently, rents are lower than they've been in years—averaging in the high \$20s per square foot. That's a big drop from a couple of years ago when rents peaked in the low \$40s per square foot.



**CENTRALLY LOCATED:** Shira Beckerman (below), Pearl Theatre's managing director, is excited about the company's new home.

Affordable space is what brought Theatre Development Fund, which operates the popular TKTS Broadway and off-Broadway discount

**Given the size needs of performance groups, the area is really the only choice**

ticket booth at Duffy Square, to the garment district in mid-2008, after more than 30 years in Times Square. The nonprofit moved its office

to roughly 10,000 square feet at 520 Eighth Ave., which is home to a number of groups, including Epic Repertory Theatre Company and Theatre Communications Group.

"We moved because things got significantly more expensive [around Times Square]," says Victoria Bailey, executive director of the Theatre Development Fund. "And we needed to be as close as we could to Times Square, so the garment district made sense."

Roundabout Theatre Company kicked off the exodus to the area 10 years ago, when it moved its administrative offices to West 39th Street from Broadway and West 45th Street. The loftlike buildings in the area are a natural fit for dancers and other performers.

"For the size and space that theater companies need, the area is the only choice," says Eric Gural, executive managing director of New-

mark Knight Frank, the landlord of 520 Eighth Ave. He adds that good access to public transportation also draws tenants. "They can move downtown, but that is too far from the theaters."

When the Philadelphia-based Baryshnikov Arts Center decided to open shop in New York City in 2005, it bought the top three floors of the six-story building at 450 W. 37th St. to create performance space. Towards the end of 2008, BAC expanded, snapping up the third floor for \$4.5 million to create more theater space. Since then, it has spent between \$8 million and \$9 million renovating the 8,000-square-foot space. Now dubbed the Jerome Robbins Theater, it will open in February.

"There weren't a whole lot of us around when we moved in," says Stanford Makishi, BAC's executive director. "Since then, there have been a number of art galleries and non-profits that have opened up."

### "Critical mass"

AND THEY ARE still trooping in. Last month, the Joyce Theater Foundation made the leap. It took over the former home for the now defunct New Dance Group at 305 W. 38th St. There, it has crafted 11 studio spaces for rehearsals, auditions and workshops just a stone's throw from several of its peers.

"There is a critical mass of dance studios in the area," says Linda Shelton, executive director of the Joyce Theater, adding that it's helpful to be a quick walk away from friends and colleagues.

The arrival of the artsy set has been a welcome development in an area that has been losing manufacturing jobs for decades. Although garment and fashion companies remain the dominant businesses in the area, the arts groups have taken up some of the slack. Many note that the diversification is a plus for the neighborhood, which has been changing in other ways.

Within the past year, for example, no less than 17 hotels have opened in the garment district. Last year, the area also got a luxury residential tower, the 569-apartment Emerald Green, which is now looking for tenants. The arts groups together with Emerald Green and the hotels make the neighborhood much more attractive to other businesses.

"The performing arts groups are a great asset," says Jerry Scupp, deputy director of the Fashion Center BID. "They complement the fashion industry and demonstrate the creative spirit and energy of the neighborhood." ■