

What a Difference a Room Makes

A beacon of the arts, FlynnSpace rose from the ashes of the Last Chance Saloon

IN THE LATE 1990S, NEXT DOOR TO THE Flynn Center and down a flight of stairs, was a dive bar with the dead-end name Last Chance Saloon. "My office smelled of beer and cigarettes," says artistic director Arnie Malina, recalling the days before the Flynn was able to buy the adjacent building and transform the saloon into a vital component of cultural life in Burlington.

Converted into a "black box" — black-draped walls, flexible seating for 180, café at the back — FlynnSpace has become a tiny perfect venue brimming with jazz, dance, theater, mixed-media and downright experimental forms of performance art.

During the long, dark winter evenings in particular, the space is a kind of cultural hearth, burning steadily as a haven for edgy and underappreciated performers. Many of the artists who appear at FlynnSpace would never be the right fit for the downtown tavern circuit nearby, nor could they sell out the 1,450-plus seats of the MainStage, the primary venue at the Flynn Center for the Performing Arts.

Originally an art deco movie palace in the 1930s, the Flynn Center was revived and reopened in 1981, and by the late '90s it had helped put Burlington on the map for national touring

acts. But for little-known artists and small-scale performances, the Flynn was forced to rig up on-stage seating at MainStage in the cavernous auditorium. Besides obvious drawbacks for the audience, the setup was "expensive to run in terms of manpower, heating, lighting and sound, because it meant opening up the entire auditorium," Malina says. "We needed a smaller, more flexible setting."

The need for such a space had existed across the Burlington arts scene for some time. As a city, Burlington was never highly industrialized, and it had few of the warehouses and lofts that typically lend themselves to aesthetic pursuits in urban areas.

When FlynnSpace was finally launched, with the help of a capital fundraising campaign, this basement room — a mere 45-by-55-foot area — opened up a wealth of new possibilities and helped solidify Burlington's growing reputation as an arts-savvy small city with sophisticated taste.

The space is in constant use, and its attributes are perhaps best on display during the annual Burlington Discover Jazz Festival. While a throng will be seated upstairs to hear a star such as Branford Marsalis, a cluster of cognoscenti can gather downstairs to



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Photographed by
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Clockwise from above: Inside the FlynnSpace during a performance by Yusef Lateef and Adam Rudolph; artistic director Arnie Malina; trumpeter Jason Palmer; FlynnSpace manager Brian Johnson

Ingenuity

hear the obscure-yet-legendary Yusef Lateef. With the flexibility of FlynnSpace (and the way the jazz festival emphasizes community interaction), a FlynnSpace performer might remain after the show for a “meet-the-artist” session, and A-list stars also appear at FlynnSpace during the festival for these up-close talks with fans.

The space is also the permanent home, with a theater-in-the-round format, of the Vermont Stage Company, and can be configured as a cabaret or in a range of other shapes that always creates a close-knit atmosphere for both the performers and the audience.

“Intimacy is our middle name,” says FlynnSpace manager Brian Johnson, who notes that the café at the back of the space is a crucial part of the vibe and, he might have added, a long way from the days of the Last Chance Saloon. “It’s more of a European thing. The audience can bring their drinks to their seats. People love that.” 🍀



Some events
scheduled this
season at
FlynnSpace in
Burlington:

- **Double Edge Theatre** presents original stage pieces that incorporate “text, movement, large props, puppets and surreal changes of scene.” Nov. 20–21.
- **So Percussion** performs “mind-expanding chamber music that is at turns raucous and touching, barbarous and heartfelt.” Dec. 4–5.
- **Vermont Stage Company** opens its season Dec. 9 with “Winter Tales.” Other Vermont Stage presentations this season include “Souvenir,” “Shipwrecked!” and “My Ohio.”
- **Miguel Gutierrez’s** dance work “Last Meadow” borrows movement and words from the films of James Dean to explore “the way we project unrealistic and out-sized expectations onto each other and our identity as a nation.” Jan. 15–16.

— Source: Flynn Center for the Performing Arts. Schedule subject to change. For more information, visit www.flynncenter.org.