

Black Ensemble moving its Uptown home to new complex on Clark

BY HEDY WEISS
Theater Critic

It's a done deal — or at least it should be by 2 p.m. today.

That's when the Black Ensemble Theater will sign on the dotted line and take possession of its new 50,000-square-foot home at 4440-4450 N. Clark in the Uptown neighborhood, just a few blocks from its current spot at 4520 N. Beacon.

And if all goes as planned, the company — which over the course of its 30-year history has managed to attract a uniquely multiracial audience to its musical theater productions — will open in the spring of 2008 with an arts complex that contains a 299-seat main-

stage (an increase of 100 seats from its current home), a 150-seat studio theater, and related educational, training and administrative facilities.

The purchase of the two buildings was assured Wednesday as a result of the City Council's approval of a \$6 million Tax Increment Financing subsidy which will cover the cost of acquisition and related expenses.

Fund-raising campaign

The theater company will embark on a major capital campaign to raise between \$6 million and \$7.5 million for the construction and operation of the complex. John Morris of John Morris Architects/Planners, who oversaw the-

ater projects at Steppenwolf and Lookingglass, will be the architect.

"Now the real work begins," said Jackie Taylor, BET's founder and artistic director. "And I'm thrilled, because having this new facility will allow us to expand the variety of our work and have much greater flexibility in terms of what we offer our audiences.

"We'll be sticking to our essential musical formula. Our 'basic hamburgers' will still be a major part of our menu, of course, because the music is crucial to our mission of bringing people of all backgrounds together. But we also will be able to do some more experimental things — comedies and dramas. And when we have a hugely successful show like 'At

Last: The Etta James Story' — which was supposed to run for six weeks and ended up running nine months — we will have another stage to work with."

Personnel changes

As part of its projected growth, the Black Ensemble has put together a five-year plan and begun to strengthen its board and add staff.

"We've hired a director of development already and will bring on a business manager at the end of this quarter," said Taylor, 54, who began her company in 1976 with a production of "The Other Cinderella." "And Ruben Echoles has just been promoted to serve as the theater's assistant artistic director."

Alan Bell, an attorney at Char-ity & Associates and chairman of the development committee for BET's board, said no other local company has been as successful in bridging cultural differences through the arts. "And now," he said, "as Uptown is going through a gentrification process, this theater promises to be a great way to keep an African-American presence going and to say to the local population, 'Here is a theater that is right next door to you. It's exciting and can be great learning experience, so come join the show.'"

Next up at BET will be "Nina Simone: The High Priestess Speaks," which begins previews tonight. Phone: (773) 769-4451.

hweiss@suntimes.com