

# Bindlestiff all but back in business

BY TOM CARTER

A LEASE is close to being signed that will put Bindlestiff Studio in the new theater under the Plaza Apartments at Sixth and Howard streets for \$1 a year, a deal similar to what nonprofit TODCO proposed seven years ago.

"Basic terms" for the lease have been reached, Redevelopment liaison Mike Grisso announced at the South of Market Project Area Committee on Nov. 19. Redevelopment owns the whole building. But the lease won't be signed until the new year, and Grisso wouldn't discuss details until then.

But a Bindlestiff board member active in the negotiations over two years told The Extra that the draft stipulates that Bindlestiff have a partner in the 4,409-square-foot theater if it wants the proposed \$1-a-year lease for 10 years.

**Alex Torres, left,** shows director Bryan Pangilinan the empty theater shell that will be built out to Bindlestiff's specifications.



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

When Redevelopment bought the corner property in 2000 for \$1.8 million, TODCO was the only outfit answering the request for proposals to build low-cost housing there. The nonprofit planned to build 115 units and an underground theater it would sell Bindlestiff for \$1.

The deal fell through when the Planning Commission rejected TODCO on a 4-3 vote, then decided to create Redevelopment's own nonprofit developer.

Bindlestiff's negotiations are headed now for "a happy kind of ending," Alex Torres, the board member, said in an interview. The partner Bindlestiff is negotiating with is Arthouse, an arm of California Lawyers for the Arts.

Torres hopes the long-vacant theater, with its entrance and box office upstairs at 185 Sixth St., will open by July. It would finally end what late SomArts Executive Director Jack Davis called Bindlestiff's long "heroic struggle" to stay alive by "reinventing themselves in a distressed neighborhood."

From the outset, the band of artists had little experience raising money on a scale that met their evolving financial obligations with the agency to develop the Plaza's underground theater shell. And their organization was often in disarray. More than once Redevelopment gave Bindlestiff second chances by extending deadlines.

The Bindlestiff name was bestowed by a Canadian drama teacher who started the small group on pennies in 1989 in an impoverished storefront under the thread-

bare Plaza Hotel. Filipino artists got involved in 1997, becoming the resident company and performing in the black box theater.

Redevelopment promised when it bought the property not to displace Bindlestiff forever and to bring it back. During construction the company moved to a small performance site around the corner at 505 Natoma St.

After the Plaza Apartments were finished — an eye-catching eight stories embellished with red and orange panels — Redevelopment and Bindlestiff haggled over a lease and more than \$500,000 that Bindlestiff would need to build out the 99-seat theater. The money problems got solved last year with dollars from Redevelopment itself and the mayor's office.

The pristine, concrete theater shell that looms like a high-ceiling bomb shelter has been vacant since March 2006, awaiting the build out. Since July, Bindlestiff has been without a performing site. It chose not to renew its lease at 505 Natoma, now rented to another theater company. Bindlestiff occupies an office in the Mint Mall at 953 Mission St.

Until the lease is signed, the build out can't begin. The architects' preproduction plans need a final review, too, Torres said. Then bids can be sought. What held up negotiations, Torres said, were complex Redevelopment drafts and an insistence that Bindlestiff have partners.

"We didn't understand that," Torres said. "We didn't have partners before — we ran it on our own — so why now?"

Bindlestiff's negotiations with Arthouse would have it as an advisory partner for one to two years, Torres said. Arthouse was formed 21 years ago with the San Francisco Arts Commission to help artists find live and work spaces. Bindlestiff would take care of day-to-day theater expenses and staff pay and when possible rent space to other groups.

The lease draft has two 10-year options, Torres said. ■

## Canon Kip heart of SoMa – Coleman heart of Canon Kip

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Folsom streets in 1990. But while the Park and Recreation Department's small staff (cut by half in recent years) hosts as many basketball teams and community programs as it can, they don't have time to do "social work."

After Canon Kip, Gene Coleman went on to his "second career," joining the San Francisco City Planning Department as an outreach worker in 1984, working his way up to planner, and then transferring to the Mayor's Office of Community Development where he served as deputy director until retiring last year. TODCO named its most recent Yerba Buena senior housing development in his honor when it opened in 2005, Eugene Coleman Community House with the word "Community" standing out in bright red on its 45-foot-high Howard Street sign. After a sudden brief illness, Gene passed away on Oct. 19 at a much-too-young age of 70.

### AN APPRECIATION

Eugene Coleman's Canon Kip was the penultimate realization of "social capital." It was a place of many positive purposes, a network of many caring individuals and organizations. It was an inspiration for many spirits of all ages; it was the glue that held a community together. It was the Heart of our SoMa. Bishop Swing never grasped or valued this. And we have never been able to replace it.

All-purpose community centers like Canon Kip have nearly disappeared around the nation. Abandonment of dependable general operating funding by cities and foundations in favor of specialized programs and competitive grant cycles has broken

community facilities up into scattered bits and pieces targeting specific populations. The accompanying political vulnerability of uncertain funding has discouraged advocacy. The professional quality of the services has greatly improved in many ways. But the price of this balkanization is the loss of a shared community consciousness and everyday human networks that cut across lines of age and race, cultures and organizations. We have all become specialists. But Gene Coleman was a community-ist.

Times change and neighborhoods change with them. Residents and workers must come and go. Leaders pass on. Central city life has grown much harsher for many in the last 25 years, and in today's world realistic hope is precious. If any community is to survive for generations it needs to become embodied — physically in places we build, socially in organizations we maintain, and spiritually in the histories we pass on. Gene Coleman's history and spirit must endure South of Market. ■



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

**The pool table** at Canon Kip Community House, ideally located at Natoma and Eighth streets, was a draw for neighborhood youth who welcomed a place to play and socialize.