



Best of San Francisco ® 2011

Best Up-and-Coming Theater Company

published: May 18, 2011

By Keith Bowers

PianoFight Productions is a theater company about 5 years old, made up of mostly young people, and it's recently homeless. For any other troupe, that could be a sign of significant trouble. But PianoFight has a plan.

The company left its former home, Off-Market Theater, several months ago on good terms after months of planning.

It's negotiating a lease for a new space in the Tenderloin that will have a bar and restaurant, multiple stages, and rehearsal and office space.

Impressive? Sure. But we haven't told you the backstory.

Only one of PianoFight's members works full time with the troupe; the rest have day jobs. Not many of the members earned college degrees in theater or business, and few had extensive experience producing, performing, or writing elsewhere; for most it was a creative hobby, and they were drawn together by their passion for it.

Yet in 2010, PianoFight staged 170 performances between its base in San Francisco and its satellite in L.A. That equals about one every two days. The company insists on producing original work by its own members as well as local playwrights, a risky move that many theater companies are abandoning in favor of established and recognizable works that are likely to draw more viewers.

Among its productions is an audience-judged playwriting contest called ShortLived. It has a couple of sketch comedy shows that stage new productions every few months, including *The S.H.I.T. Show* and *Monday Night ForePlays*, the latter of which is written, produced, and performed by women. During the holidays it has staged versions of *Merry Forking Christmas*, whose script has numerous possible plot twists and endings — all of which have to be memorized and rehearsed — and whose direction is chosen by the audience.

In early 2010, it produced a postapocalyptic drama called *The Position*. It has made short films, including *In Production*, a mockumentary about producing a play, and *Low Shoulders*, a narrative about a teenage crime spree, whose script originated in ShortLived.

If PianoFight's plans come together at the new site — the former home of Original Joe's — the bar and restaurant will generate income, and the troupe can stage several productions in a single venue. It will also rent stage space to other groups — operating as something of a hub, like the nearby Exit Theater — and it will also have much-sought-after rehearsal and office space to rent.

How has PianoFight done it? "We had no experience, we didn't know any better, and we started doing what we wanted to do," says Rob Ready, the artistic director and only full-time employee. "I don't think we really



realized what we were doing at the time."

But spending a lot of time together has created a one-for-all, all-for-one approach. Ready says that last year he decided to put everything into making PianoFight a success rather than using it as a step in his own career. He says this attitude permeates the approximately 30 members of the troupe, including other core members Ray Hobbs, Devin McNulty, Duncan Wold, and Dan Williams. "If your major thing is trying to build a career for yourself you're probably not going to fit in," he says.

This is echoed by Kate Jones, who produces Monday Night ForePlays. Jones says that about three years ago after moving to San Francisco from Chicago, she saw an online ad for a PianoFight audition, so she went, got the part (it was in *The Position*), and figured she'd look elsewhere for work afterward. "Little did I know this was going to be my family," she says. The company makes an effort to keep people on board and develop their creative potential. "If we think you're funny and we think you're talented, we're going to keep you and grow you."

Ideas are never rejected outright, but rather are subject to suggested revisions from other PianoFight members and eventual reworking. The group's tight bond means members can be honest with each other, making criticism well received and productive.

The results show in *ForePlays*, which has shown growth and improvement in writing and performing over the year it's been onstage. Jones reiterates that spending so much time with the same people helps. "We're putting it on, we're hanging out afterwards, we're coming up with ideas for the next show," she says. "We constantly want to put out new material. That's what PianoFight is about."

And although it might sound cliched, Jones says the company has really come to resemble a family: "I feel like my name is Kate Jones PianoFight."