

The Business

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The Half-Price Ticket Biz Heats Up

The League of Chicago Theatres' redesigned Web sites still won't save you a trip to the Hot Tix booth. But a new service called Goldstar might.

By Deanna Isaacs

Within the next few weeks the League of Chicago Theatres will unveil redesigns of its two Web sites, Hot Tix and chicagoplays.com. After a \$130,000 makeover (paid for by the state, the MacArthur Foundation, and Boeing) chicagoplays will offer geographic searches, links to tourism sites, and according to new league director Deanna Shoss, a "more dramatic" appearance—but Hot Tix will remain a mere listing of what's available. To purchase half-price tickets, you'll still have to drag your ass to one of Hot Tix's three booths or Tower Records (in which case bring cash) and hope the show you want hasn't sold out by the time you get there. Shoss, getting up to speed after less than a month on the job, says online ticketing for Hot Tix is still "in a discovery phase."

While the league diddles, the competition has tiptoed into town. Its Web site may say "coming soon," but California-based Goldstar Events is already offering half-price online tickets for selected dates at Chicago theaters—including Steppenwolf and the Goodman. CEO Jim McCarthy says they're not out to cannibalize Hot Tix; he claims that Goldstar, which offers a range of events including music and sports and works with sites like Daily Candy, is marketing to a "mainstream" audience Hot Tix might never reach. On the other hand, last week he had click-and-get tickets for 32 Chicago events. You have to become a Goldstar member to order, but that's painless: an e-mail address and zip code does it; next thing you know, you're getting a weekly newsletter with event listings and alerts to late additions.

Goldstar was launched in 2002 by McCarthy (a Geocities vet) and two buddies he'd worked with at a failed education-software start-up. They capitalized it with \$1,000 and a year or so of their own unpaid labor. In LA, their best-established market, about half the events they list are small theater performances. The theaters "identify the performances where they can predict that they'll have inventory—no different from an airline or a hotel," McCarthy says. Goldstar gives them the opportuni-

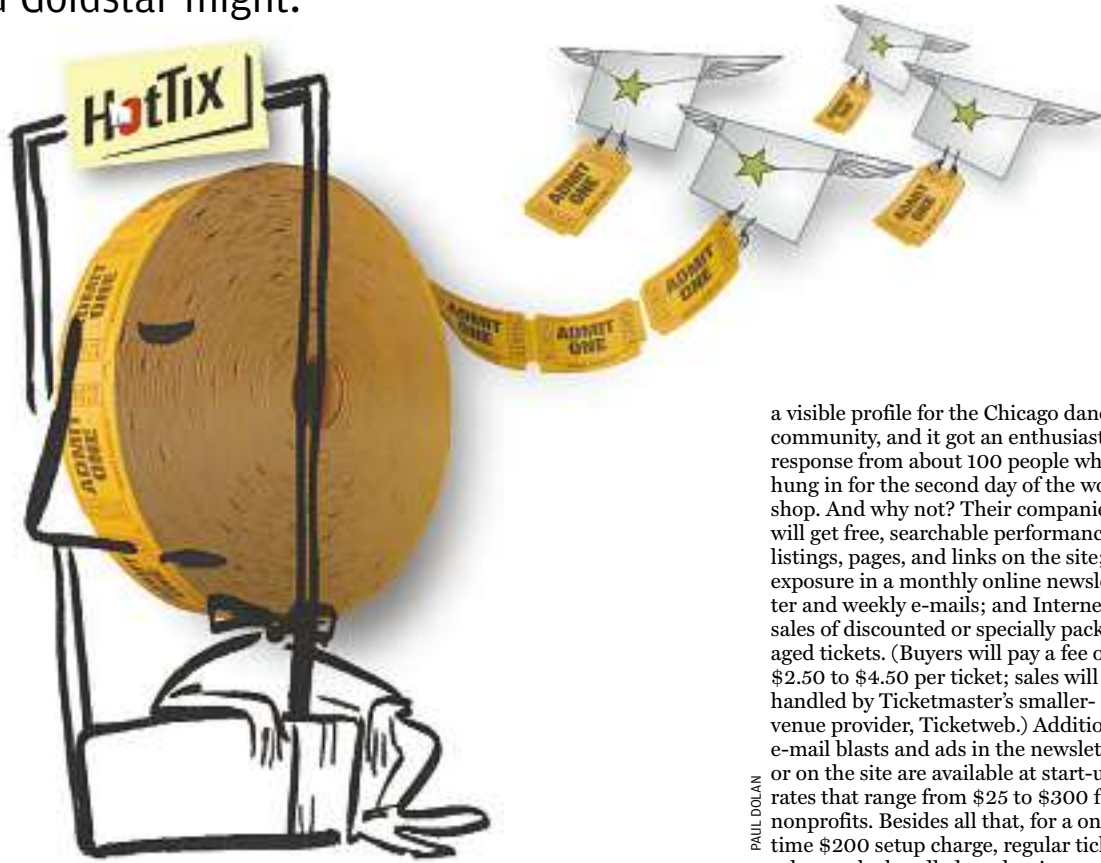
ty to reap half the ticket price from those potentially empty seats and to expand their reach. There's no cost to the venue; Goldstar makes its money from a fee paid by the customer (usually about \$4 per ticket, slightly more than what Hot Tix charges). According to McCarthy, Goldstar has 130,000 members, mostly in California (they now operate in San Francisco and San Diego as well as LA), who also function as a source of rapid e-mail feedback on events they see. He declined to reveal annual sales.

McCarthy says the response from venues here has been warm and the competition is not with Hot Tix but with movies and DVDs: "We're trying to grow the pie for live entertainment." Terence McFarland, executive director of the league's Los Angeles counterpart, the LA Stage Alliance—which sells its half-price tickets on the Internet—says Goldstar is getting some business that would otherwise move through his organization.

Even so, he adds, ticket sales for LA Stage Tix are up 17 percent over last year. Shoss says Goldstar called the league office, but they haven't talked yet.

A Leg Up for Chicago Dance

Meanwhile, seechicagodance.com is set to launch September 6, offering discounted tickets online for any dance company that wants to sell them. At a marketing boot camp at the Cultural Center last weekend, PR firm Carol Fox & Associates rolled out a preview of the site. They've got a graceless, puke-colored dot of a logo that looks like it was inspired by BP, and a certain amount of their data reinvents a wheel already set in motion by the Chicago Dance and Music Alliance—but never mind. This is a focused, consumer-oriented, state-of-the-art Web presence that could be the first step in building



PAUL DOLAN

a visible profile for the Chicago dance community, and it got an enthusiastic response from about 100 people who hung in for the second day of the workshop. And why not? Their companies will get free, searchable performance listings, pages, and links on the site; exposure in a monthly online newsletter and weekly e-mails; and Internet sales of discounted or specially packaged tickets. (Buyers will pay a fee of \$2.50 to \$4.50 per ticket; sales will be handled by Ticketmaster's smaller-venue provider, Ticketweb.) Additional e-mail blasts and ads in the newsletter or on the site are available at start-up rates that range from \$25 to \$300 for nonprofits. Besides all that, for a one-time \$200 setup charge, regular ticket sales can be handled on the site as well. If it hadn't been 100 degrees outside it might have been Christmas.

The Web site launch is the final phase of the Chicago Community Trust's four-year dance initiative. CCT senior fellow Sarah Solotaroff says the foundation's effort is over and that from here on it's up to the community itself. But cut loose from the CCT, the audience development project is an odd creature. It looks like it should belong to an association controlled by its members—but there is no such entity. It has Hubbard Street Dance as its fiduciary agent, Hubbard Street head Gail Kalver as its director, and Carol Fox as its manager. Fox's firm is being paid for its services, but she says a lot of the work is being done pro bono. The project, budgeted at \$340,000, has raised \$200,000 in donations so far (half from CCT). According to Fox, that money paid for a limited amount of new research, the Web site and logo, an initial meeting last fall, the boot

camp, and a limited amount of advertising. The remaining \$140,000 will keep the site running for a year and pay for more advertising. The hope is that once it's established, ad revenue from the site and \$1 of the service fee on each ticket sold will support it.

Help an Artist, Step on a Toe

Judy Robins's letter to the editor of *Chicago Artists' News*, the Chicago Artists' Coalition's monthly newspaper, got prominent play in last month's issue. Why is it, Robins wondered, that Cultural Affairs is such a copycat? "For the past several years, the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs has been blitzing the Chicago visual arts community with lectures, workshops, and demonstrations (i.e., tax workshops, how to find artists' living spaces, etc) that mimic what the Chicago Artists' Coalition has been offering the Chicago visual art community for 30 years," Robins wrote. "Doesn't this hamper CAC's struggles to get grants and membership?... CAC offered many... services to artists that no one else could (i.e., insurance and emergency funds). Why now is the city stepping in and using CAC's ideas... when money is so tight and grants extremely hard to get?"

Members say there's an irony here: the Chicago Artists' Coalition was instrumental in getting the city to establish the Department of Cultural Affairs. And outgoing director Arlene Rakoncaj says a good relationship with the department is vital. But she also says a situation that started with beneficial collaborative programming has morphed into something that has CAC feeling usurped and wondering why a similar amount of attention hasn't been given to, say, writers or dancers. In a written response, Cultural Affairs spokesperson Kimberly Costello said the department has collaborated on many programs and consulted with CAC on the development of others. "Hopefully," Costello wrote, "most CAC members realize that our efforts complement theirs, and that more is more when it comes to services for the arts community." CAC finished a dicey fiscal year at the end of June in the black, but only after soliciting donations from members. ■

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Restaurants

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Reader staff and contributors and (where noted) individual Raters. Though reviewers try to reflect the Restaurant Raters' input, reviews should be considered one person's opinion; the collective Raters' opinions are best expressed in the numbers. The complete listings and information on how to become a Reader Restaurant Rater are available at www.chicagoreader.com/restaurantfinder.

In Business

Her Kitchen Is Your Kitchen

R

Rated Restaurants in Lincoln Square

Acqualina

4363 N. Lincoln | 773-770-4363

F 7.3 | S 5.8 | A 7.6 | \$\$\$ (9 REPORTS)
AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL,
MEDITERRANEAN | DINNER: SEVEN DAYS | OPEN
LATE: FRIDAY & SATURDAY TILL 11 | SMOKE FREE

The simply prepared food and minimalist interior at this Lincoln Square eatery, opened by Alex Fournier, Steven Ford, and Quay Tao, contrast dramatically with the tone of Ford and Tao's first endeavor, the over-the-top Mediterranean restaurant Tizi Melloul. While a few dishes at Acqualina are inspired by that region's cuisine—braised halibut is flavored with pistachios and spicy tomato syrup, and the pork chop is glazed with pomegranate juice and served with an orzo salad and curry froth—the menu emphasizes seasonal produce and pure flavors. Roasted Prince Edward Island mussels are accompanied only by warm harissa butter, and the grilled New York strip is served sliced, with butter and potatoes. The wine list has close to a dozen by-the-glass options between \$5 and \$9 and a limited but intriguing list of bottles from Italy, Argentina, Chile, and Spain, with a few French and American choices thrown in; most are \$45 and under. The decor leans toward natural fibers—the floors are dark wood, the chairs are upholstered in leather, bamboo stalks surround the host stand—set off by orange light fixtures and chartreuse table lamps. The servers seem to anticipate your needs, refilling your water glass but not clearing plates too early. **Laura Levy Shatkin**

Anatolian Kabob

4609 N. Lincoln | 773-561-2200

F 7.9 | S 7.7 | A 6.3 | \$ (12 REPORTS)
MIDDLE EASTERN, MEDITERRANEAN | LUNCH:
FRIDAY-SUNDAY; DINNER: MONDAY, WEDNESDAY-
SUNDAY | CLOSED TUESDAY | OPEN LATE: FRIDAY
& SATURDAY TILL 11

One of the few budget options on Lincoln Square's burgeoning restaurant row, this storefront spot serves Turkish standards, including several vegetarian choices. The room is inviting, and Raters find the service friendly and eager to please. The kitchen delivers a lot for the money. Entrees, which top out at \$13, are assertively seasoned and arranged beautifully on the plate. **Michael Lenehan**

Bad Dog Tavern

4535 N. Lincoln | 773-334-4040

F 7.3 | S 7.5 | A 7.9 | \$\$\$ (18 REPORTS)
AMERICAN CONTEMPORARY/REGIONAL | LUNCH:
TUESDAY-SUNDAY; DINNER: SEVEN DAYS; SUNDAY

In the focus-group speak of the grocery store aisle, there's nothing wrong with the word *homemade*.

Real estate agents perfume houses for sale with freshly baked cookies for a reason, after all. But a product actually made in a home kitchen is something else: illegal.

That's what Alexis Frankfort discovered about a year ago. She'd left her job as a portfolio analyst at Merrill Lynch for frosting. "I loved buttercream, so I went to pastry school," she says. "Buttercream just keeps me going." After training at the City Colleges of Chicago's French Pastry School, she landed at Bittersweet for a year ("great buttercream," she notes). It was only after she started craving her own business that she realized "you couldn't do it out of your house." She examined her options and found few, so she started researching shared-use commercial kitchens, learning that even nationally the only ones out there were job-training centers run by non-profits. To gauge interest in the idea locally she posted a survey on bakerynet.com. Then, with the names of 30 potential clients in hand, she walked into her bank.

What she and her partner and boyfriend, Jeff Leverenz, wound up creating—Kitchen Chicago, a shared-use kitchen with a storefront in Ravenswood Manor—is a novel solution to a common problem. For many small businesses the Internet has radically simplified the start-up process: you knit a sweater,

Kitchen Chicago

4664 N. Manor
773-463-0863

you create a Web site, someone buys your sweater, and everybody's happy. There's no wall of debt—from a room of industrial knitting machines, say—that threatens to collapse and crush you. But since bakers and cooks are required by the government to operate in a commercially certified kitchen, they can't start small: they need a separate workspace, which means large start-up costs. And in the restaurant business there's little tradition of sharing costs and space.

It was a niche that, once filled, got noticed. Former pastry chefs at Blackbird and North Pond rent time at Kitchen Chicago, as does restaurateur Jerry Kleiner of Marché, Gioco, and Opera in preparation for his new Latino place on Fulton Street. There's also a mother-son team called the Windy City Candy Company and Papa Lena, a pair of former motivational speakers who are marketing an old family recipe for chips made from red bell peppers. All told, Kitchen Chicago has a few dozen clients sharing the 1,200 square feet of its fully equipped kitchen, which is available 24 hours a day at rates between \$15 and \$22 per hour.

As the Papa Lena team washes a sinkful of peppers in the back, Frankfort sits in the front and says she's pleased by how amicable the space sharing has stayed: "I was so hoping it wouldn't be, 'Hey, you touched my stuff.'" At a recent tenant meeting, she says, her two toffee producers, competitors outside the store, "ended up giving each other tips on how not to get the butter to break."

The clients all regularly contribute items for sale in the storefront, which is spacious and homey-looking, with long striped drapes marking off the kitchen. On Sundays the storefront hosts a crepe brunch prepared by Melissa Yen and Sara Voden of Vella Cafe. There are hand-sewn patchwork aprons on offer, and a retro white stove and butter churns for decoration; there's also Wi-Fi. Among the items available on a recent afternoon were a lemon ricotta tart and a wild berry charlotte from Bleeding Heart Bakery (slogan "Pastry for Peace"), run by chef Michelle Garcia, who says that without Kitchen Chicago "it would've taken me much, much longer to open."



Alexis Frankfort; Melissa Yen with her husband, Laurent; scrambled-egg crepe with spinach sauce

Garcia had "basically taken the tour of Chicago natural food stores," she said recently at Kitchen Chicago, midway through a wedding order for 460 lollipops imprinted with the initials of the bride and groom. After sojourns baking in Amsterdam and San Francisco she came back to her native Chicago last year with the intention of opening an all-organic, locally sourced bakery complete with solar-powered ovens. While making wedding cakes for Vosges Chocolates, she spent nine months "testing recipes and talking everyone's ear off about how great it's going to be." She's just signed a lease on a storefront in Ukrainian Village (she's currently selling her stuff at the Lincoln Park and Wicker Park farmers' markets). But for now she plans to continue cooking out of Kitchen Chicago. "I want to show you can work together with people and still have your own business," she says.

Meanwhile, another client, Michael Farrell, the fromagier at Spiaggia, has returned from the Green City Market, towing his portable brick pizza oven behind his truck. He apologizes for having left something in the kitchen. Frankfort dismisses it: "If it wasn't sitting on the grease trap I would've eaten it," she says. She looks into the back. "Are the peppers in your way?" she asks.

Frankfort has scaled back her own baking to the occasional wedding cake. But her ambition for the business is growing: there are evening events slated for the neighborhood, which has embraced the cafe. (A calendar of events is available at kitchenchicago.com.) "We've got some people to try something new every day," she says. She's also planning events to highlight individual tenants. And she's shopping for a Kitchen Chicago ice cream bike to ride around nearby Horner Park, selling her clients' wares.

But this afternoon she's tired: at the moment she runs the storefront alone during the week, joined by Leverenz on weekends. It is thanks to him that she's there any morning, she says: "Jeff wakes me up with ice cream to get me here. He feeds me a sweet to get me out of bed." —**Nicholas Day**

Closing

Tournesol, at 4343 N. Lincoln, is slated to close August 6 and reopen at the end of the month as a wine bar serving a small-plate menu.

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