

THE JOYCE PONDERES NEW SITES

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The Joyce Theater, the pre-eminent presenter of dance in downtown Manhattan, is facing an uncertain future. With the expiration of its lease in Chelsea approaching and a promised move to ground zero still remote, the group has been forced to consider alternative sites where it might have to move after 35 years on Eighth Avenue.

"The timing is so difficult because we can't really tell when we'll be there," Linda Shelton, the theater's executive director, said of the World Trade Center site. "As it gets closer to 2016, the timing downtown becomes more important to us."

The Joyce's 35-year lease in Chelsea expires in 2016, and theater officials say the landlord is seeking to charge them nearly market rent for the space, which they now lease for \$1 a year and a commitment to maintain the building.

The Joyce Theater Foundation, which presents dance, had planned to continue operating at its 500-seat Chelsea space even after expanding into a new 1,000-seat theater at ground zero. (It also has a 74-seat space in SoHo). But now Joyce officials are compelled to make contingency plans because there has been little progress downtown, where the most optimistic forecast would have construction begin in 2014.

"When we were selected back in 2004, 2016 was a long way off," Ms. Shelton said. Of their current space, she said: "We love this location and we love all the programs that we've developed here. We really hope something can be worked out. But we have a responsibility to the dance field, so we can't do nothing."

Plans for a performing arts center and a museum at ground zero, as called for in a 2003 master plan, have been whittled down over the years. Once, the plan had called for four institutions housed in two buildings. Now only the Joyce is supposed to move there, into a building designed by Frank Gehry, for which no fund-raising has begun.

The Joyce's current landlord, Ballet Tech Company, which is run by Eliot Feld, has owned the building since 1979. Were the Joyce to renew its lease, Mr. Feld's company "expects us to start paying something closer to the market rent," said J. Kerry Clayton, the chairman of the Joyce, adding that he could not specify the amount but that it was in the "high six figures" a year.

Mr. Feld, in an interview on Tuesday, would not comment on the terms he is seeking. He said he would like the Joyce to remain, but that he also must attend to his academic and dance public school for underprivileged students. Mr. Feld said he discontinued his company's performances a year ago because the troupe could not support both the school and the shows.

"Our interest is to find the point at which we are not abandoning our responsibilities to the activities of our foundation — which is our school — and reconciling that" with the Joyce's ability to sustain its expenses, Mr. Feld said. "We have the activities of our foundation to support and we have an asset and we've fulfilled our obligation for the 35 years and it was not meant to be in perpetuity."

In 1979 the Original Ballets Foundation — the Feld Ballet's parent at the time — took title to the Elgin Theater, a former movie house. With the support of LuEsther T. Mertz (the theater is named after her daughter, who died in 1974), the building became a space where Mr. Feld's dance troupe and other midsize companies could perform and pay subsidized rent.

"Our association with the Joyce Theater Foundation is historical — we created it and we want to see it succeed," Mr. Feld said. "But we can't forgo our own interests in favor of another's."

If the Joyce leaves its Chelsea home, its name could stay behind. "The name is attached to the building, but the name belongs to our foundation," Mr. Feld said. "It is trademarked and owned by the Ballet Tech Foundation. We're talking about that as well. It's a two-pronged discussion."

The Joyce has begun scanning the market to review appropriate locations. Should it have to move, the foundation will most likely have to pay more than \$1 a year wherever it goes, so its overhead is expected to increase. The Joyce currently has an operating budget of \$7.7 million. It also expects to take on the additional expense of operating the new theater at ground zero.

"It would certainly be a stretch, but I think the Joyce is up for it," Ms. Shelton said. "That's why we're anxious about it now."

To prepare for this eventuality and evaluate its options, the Joyce is engaged in long-term planning with a consulting team that includes Denham Wolf, a real estate company that advises nonprofits, and Management Consultants for the Arts, an executive search and planning firm.

Mr. Clayton said the Joyce had twice offered to buy the theater from Ballet Tech — in 2007 and again last summer — for an amount that he would not specify. Both offers were rejected.

"We thought it was in the long-term interests of our foundation to retain ownership," Mr. Feld said.

Since then the two parties have been trying to work out a lease extension, and both describe the discussions as amicable. "We're optimistic that they'll come to a happy resolution," said Kate D. Levin, the commissioner of the Department of Cultural Affairs for New York.

Ideally, Mr. Clayton said, he would like to negotiate an interim arrangement of about 10 years to give the Joyce room to figure out what comes

next. "Sooner or later, we're going to have to find another venue," he said. "We have enough time, but we can't be waiting that much longer."

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