

THEATER

Overflowing with ambition

Despite — or perhaps because of — its extremely small size, the Black Dahlia Theatre has had an impressive string of successes.

By MIKE BOEHM Times Staff Writer

O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell And count myself a king of infinite space, Were it not that I have bad dreams. — HAMLET

IF only the Royal Dane could have checked with Matt Shakman over at the Black Dahlia. He appears to have the problem solved.

Shakman runs a theater that is about as nutshell as theater gets: 28 tattered and scuffed, creaky wood-backed seats that look as if they might have done hard duty in a junior high school auditorium during the Eisenhower administration, augmented by a half-dozen black metal folding chairs. The truncated rows ascend on five risers, overlooking a playing space the size of a modest — if that — bedroom.

To get in, you buy your tickets out front, across Pico Boulevard from a big auto body shop. Look up, and a sign near what should be the front door informs you: "Please do not enter (you will be onstage)." Instead, you are directed to circle clockwise around the L-shaped, art-deco building to the brick-walled back, where another sign, on a reddish metal door, warns off latecomers: "The play has begun. Do not enter. You will be shot."

It's a king's prerogative to execute recalcitrant subjects, and Shakman, the otherwise benevolent ruler of this very finite space, hates late arrivals. Apart from that, the founder and artistic director of the Black Dahlia, a round-faced, boyishly dimpled-and-scrubbed looking fellow with tousled fair hair, seems not to have a complaint in the world.

And why should he? The dreams inside his nutshell are happy, and they keep coming true. The story of the Black Dahlia reads like the wish fulfillment of every young thespian who comes to L.A., hungering to do artful, warmly received work on stage, find mentors (preferably famous, powerful ones) and reap some of the more remunerative rewards of film and television.

Shakman, 29, sits in the front row of his theater, telling the saga at chatty length with his friend and ally, actor-producer Steven Klein, who is 28. They spin it engagingly, in mild yet eager voices, making even the backstage yarns from their college days together at Yale sound interesting.

Shakman and Klein, who is dark, slight, sharp-featured and just as boyish-looking as his friend, pursued acting careers in the Northeast after graduating, but by late 1998 they had made their separate ways to L.A., where they reconnected. Shakman, a doctor's son from Ventura, set about finding a cheap place to turn into a theater, much as he and the Boston-bred Klein had turned dining halls and a former squash court into play-spaces at Yale.

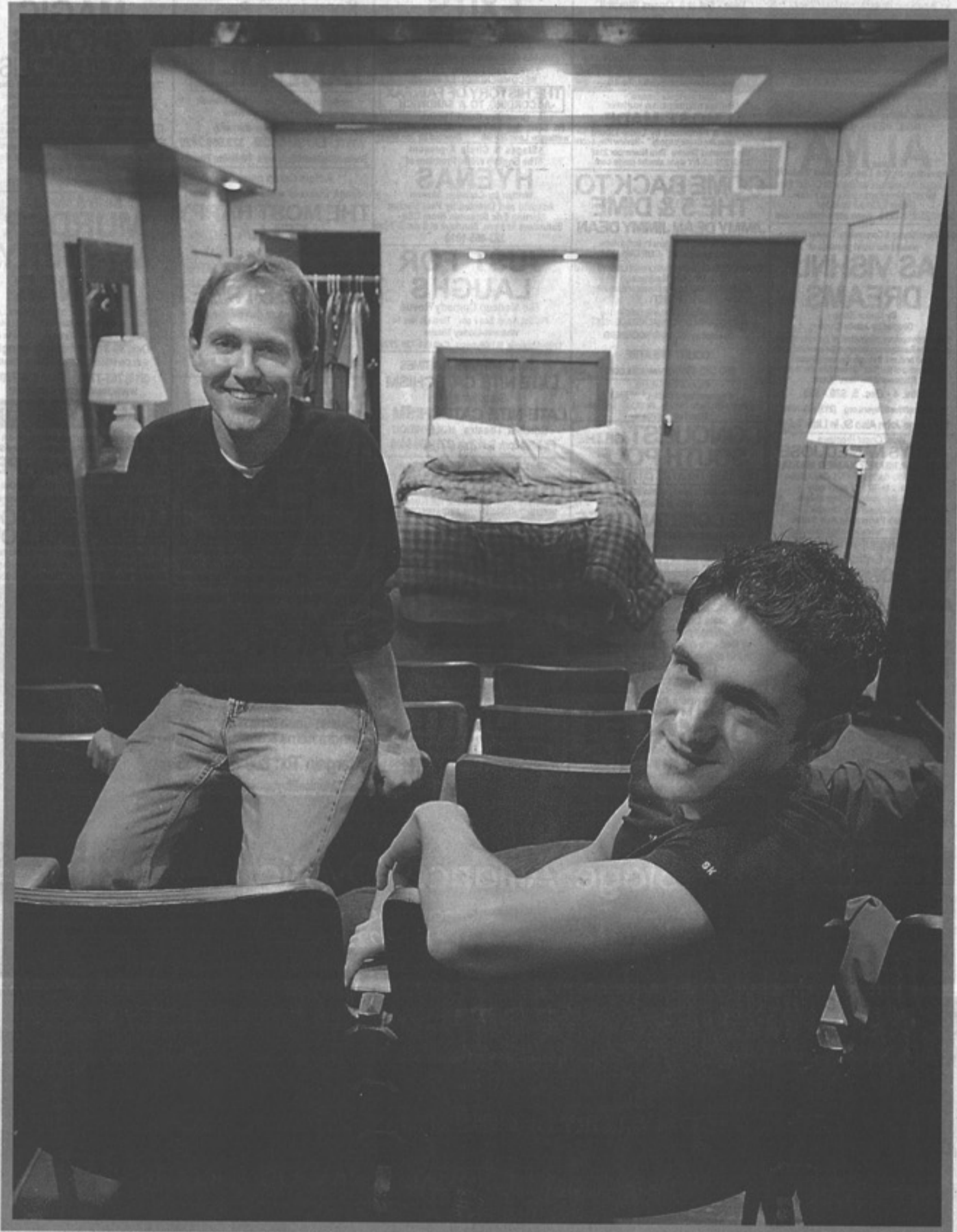
He found an abandoned storefront on Pico — the landlord couldn't believe he wanted to squeeze a theater into such a nook — and named it for a famous, unsolved 1940s L.A. murder case. The name fit with Shakman's enjoyment of mystery and legend; during an interview, he says several times that part of the thrill of doing plays is walking with the "ghosts" of theater's traditions. His mission from the start has been to stage contemporary plays never seen before in L.A., weaving in new discoveries that haven't been done anywhere.

While Shakman was still making his plans, an actor friend working at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater, knowing his fascination with Orson Welles' youthful rise and long descent, sent him the script to "Orson's Shadow," a play by veteran actor-director Austin Pendleton that Steppenwolf was premiering. It revolved around a middle-aged Welles knocking heads with a middle-aged Laurence Olivier. Shakman thought it would be the ideal show to launch the Dahlia, catering to L.A.'s fixation with show biz and signaling that this young, new theater was no outworn venture by kids just speaking to their own generation, but a diverse company interested in enlisting older actors and the whole gamut of L.A. talent to tell all kinds of stories.

How small did you say?

SHAKMAN contacted Pendleton (another Yale alumnus) through mutual associates. The author liked his ideas and was agreeable to an L.A. premiere in a small theater (a major Southern California premiere at San Diego's Old Globe had been tepidly received). Re-creating the conversation, Shakman acts out the double-take Pendleton did over the phone upon hearing just how small the Black Dahlia was.

He enlisted Klein to produce and act in the show, then, having never directed older actors, grew a goatee for the auditions, hoping it would give him a seasoned look. The beard soon went — too scratchy, Shakman says; too calculated



UNLIMITED: Matt Shakman, left, founder and artistic director of the Black Dahlia Theatre, and ally Steven Klein revel in the challenge of their space.

and silly-looking, Klein asserts.

The reviewers came, and "Orson's Shadow" conquered, running for six months, including a successful transfer to the 99-seat Tiffany Theater. Opening during spring 2001, the show won a passel of awards from Backstage West, the LA Weekly and the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle.

Among the impressed customers was veteran television writer Richard Kramer, who plugged it as a must-see to his associate Edward Zwick, one of Hollywood's powers as director of the film "Glory," creator of the TV series "Thirty-something" and producer of films including "Shakespeare in Love" and "Traffic."

Zwick had met Welles and another figure in the play, British critic Kenneth Tynan. He was struck by how Shakman's direction brought them and the other characters alive.

"The casting, the interpretation of the parts, everything was at a level that was really extraordinary for this or any other venue," Zwick recalled by phone.

Soon, the producer had invited Shakman to hang out and observe on the set of his then-current TV series, "Once and Again." By the end of the show's run in 2002, Shakman had made his TV debut directing one of its last episodes. Steady television work followed, providing the Dahlia leader a living while he runs the theater without pay. Klein says he could support himself with screen roles and stage producing but is too interested in his day job — as a fundraising consultant for nonprofits — to give it up.

Klein found his own highly placed Hollywood ally in Bruce Cohen, a Yale



'BELFAST BLUES': Geraldine Hughes' one-woman show cemented the theater's reputation.

alum and producer of "American Beauty" and "Big Fish." The two cofounded Catme, a collective of do-it-yourself filmmakers devoted to working quickly with bare-bones means. Shakman is a member of the group, whose name is a jest on Dogme, Danish director Lars von Trier's manifesto advocating austerity in filmmaking.

Cohen says there's nothing mercenary about the Dahlia's TV and film connections. "It's not in their nature to do their theater work just to get dis-

covered. They're doing it because they love the work and the pieces they get to do. A very nice parallel benefit of doing it in L.A. is it can help you on the film and TV side."

The Black Dahlia cemented its reputation with "Belfast Blues," a one-woman show by Geraldine Hughes, who had played Joan Plowright in "Orson's Shadow." Impressed by how Shakman and Klein operated, she brought them her memory play about growing up amid Northern Ireland's sectarian troubles. The show, directed by "Hill Street Blues" alumnus Charles Haid, premiered in 2003. It won awards and has gone on to Belfast, London, New York and Chicago, with Klein part of the production team in the two overseas stops.

Helped by good notices and good connections, the Black Dahlia has landed world premieres of plays by established writers Stephen Adly Guirgis and Oliver Mayer. Eric Stoltz played a downward-spiraling congressman dallying with a prostitute in a Washington, D.C., hotel room in the world premiere of "The Shoreham" by Charles Evered. Next Sunday's Ovation Awards could bring more laurels: The Dahlia's L.A. premiere of Adam Rapp's dark, one-actor drama, "Nocturne," has five nominations, including best play in a smaller theater, best actor (Adam Stein) and best director (Shakman).

In the current, two-actor show, "An Infinite Ache" by David Schulner, Klein doubles as producer and leading man, playing the humorously angst-filled husband in a narrative that traces a couple's rough sledding through love and marriage from youth to old age.

Shakman envisions an ongoing career directing in theater, film and television, but he is in no rush to grow the Black Dahlia. He enjoys doing good work at low cost and thinks that his venue's smallness and limited resources (a \$60,000 annual budget) impose necessity that begets invention. Maybe the nonprofit company will apply for its first

'An Infinite Ache'

Where: Black Dahlia Theatre, 5453 W. Pico Blvd., Los Angeles  
When: 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays  
Ends: Nov. 21  
Price: \$20  
Contact: (866) 468-3399

grants, so he can raise the stipends for designers and hire a general manager. "I'm very happy working here," he says. "We've developed an aesthetic uniquely connected to the space we've got."

Part of that aesthetic for an actor, says Klein, is listening for the creaking of the chairs. When so close an audience becomes restless, the squeaking is like an alarm, telling the players to focus, bear down and pull viewers back into the drama.

When it's suggested that school ties and lucky connections have helped the Black Dahlia flourish, Shakman and Klein gently proffer "synchronicity" as a better term than "connections." By that, they mean that when one good thing happens (a skillfully staged, astutely chosen play) it can instigate others, such as links to powerful mentors and impressive collaborators.

"The work has served as the anchor," Klein says. "If 'Orson's Shadow' had been bad, none of this would have happened."

Shakman points to a favorite quote from "The Old Man and the Sea" by Ernest Hemingway: "It's better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact."

"Then," he says, "when luck comes, you're ready. You do everything you can to do something well and put the right pieces together. Then, hopefully, that magic happens."