

THEATER & DANCE

This new show is in a vacant men's store. That suits Rorschach just fine.

The D.C. company's "Angel Number Nine" is the latest example of a how a resourceful itinerant theater troupe finds new nests.



By [Peter Marks](#)

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When Jenny McConnell Frederick went looking for a special something in downtown D.C. a few months ago, a men's clothing store caught her eye. The purpose of her shopping mission, though, had nothing to do with merchandising and everything to do with storytelling.

Which is how a vacant Rochester Big and Tall Men's shop on Connecticut Avenue NW, across the street from a Metro station and a few doors down from a Sephora, went from being an outlet with customers' fitting rooms to one with actors' dressing rooms.

Rorschach Theatre, one of the D.C. region's oldest and most resourceful small companies, has turned a conventional commercial property into a wholly unconventional theater space, for a world-premiere play with original punk rock songs. "Angel Number Nine," an allegory by Frederick and James L. Rogers III, adapted from Rogers's novel, takes place in an ethereal rock club, in which the music by Shawn Northrip recalls the city's punk scene of the 1990s.

“This had all the right features we needed,” Frederick said as she walked through the empty shop a few weeks ago, nearly 6,000 square feet of handsomely appointed retail space. With a wry smile, she added, “I have never worked anywhere this convenient.”

That statement contained a lot of truth about the scramble that smaller arts groups endure in a city with a dearth of easily convertible real estate. D.C. doesn’t have an old warehouse district like Baltimore’s, for instance, or much in the way of bohemian enclaves that are magnets for experimental forms of art. For itinerant companies, it’s catch as catch can, with some companies finding havens in schools and churches or even subterranean conference auditoriums. Midsize mainstay Synetic Theater is being kicked out of one such underground facility in Crystal City after this coming season.

Rorschach, founded by Frederick and Randy Baker in the late 1990s, has developed a veritable divining rod for places to put on shows. In all these years, it’s never owned a space but always managed to make a found space work, whether an old greenhouse or an office building lobby or even an actual theater. During the pandemic shutdown, a muted city itself became Rorschach’s stage: “Distance Frequencies” sent boxes monthly to theatergoers, with contents that aided them in exploring diverse outdoor spots in D.C.

For “Angel Number Nine” — which required Northrip to assemble a rock band — Rorschach needed to come in from the cold (or in this case, the heat). And in D.C.’s Golden Triangle Business Improvement District, a 44-square-block area in the heart of the city, from Dupont Circle to Pennsylvania Avenue NW, Frederick discovered a willing partner. After the BID gave her a tour of several vacant storefronts for short-term rental (some emptied during the pandemic), she came upon the men’s shop.

“We’ve been working on it on and off for years,” Frederick said of the play, as she walked down a wide central staircase that opened dramatically to a lower floor. It looked astonishingly adaptable for theatrical purposes: a large, well-defined square of bare flooring, set apart from the carpet, where the band would play; a wall of cubbyholes, once a shirt display, would be used as shelves for the production’s working bar. The floor above would be designed as an atmospheric entry in to the ’90s club scene, with museum-like exhibits and vinyl records for sale.



“Angel Number Nine” is typically Rorschachian: It’s set in a metaphysical version of the club world, with a central character, Angel (Kate Kenworthy), meeting a figure from mythology, Robert Bowen Smith’s Cupid, in a bar.

“Jenny called me, and she was like, ‘We have this new show coming up. It’s this immersive ’90s rock musical thing,’” said Northrip, whose “Titus,” a rock musical based on Shakespeare’s “Titus Andronicus,” premiered in D.C. 20 years ago. “It just seemed like kind of in my wheelhouse.”

Claiming a store for theater feels as on-brand for Northrip and other members of the creative team as for Rorschach itself — many pass in and out of the theater world. Northrip is a high school theater and film teacher in Northern Virginia; Rogers works in a business that supplies clinics for military veterans.

“This is a story that’s very dear to me,” Rogers said, referring to his novel, published a decade ago. He and Frederick have been friends since middle school in Virginia, and she has been determined for years to get an adaptation to the stage. It’s one of the thing I’m most proud of,” Rogers said. “The opportunity to bring it more people and, even more, to see it all come alive — you can’t pass that up.”

For Frederick, who also directs “Angel Number Nine,” situating theater in unexpected places is irresistible. “How to put something into a space is fascinating,” she said, poking around the store, pulling open doors to more rooms — and ever more possibilities. It’s eternally meaningful to her because Rorschach’s permanence lies in the liminal space of the imagination. Finding the next space is part of the artistic adventure.

“We made it our mission,” she said, “by necessity.”

Angel Number Nine, by James L. Rogers III and Jenny McConnell Frederick. Directed by Frederick. Through July 30 at 1020 Connecticut Ave. NW. rorschachtheatre.com.