

Opera House Arts celebrates 10th anniversary



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Community Information Services

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Resurgence: from a closed wreck to year-round arts for all

by David Walsh

STONINGTON—Opera House Arts is celebrating its 10th anniversary in 2009.

Two of the principals—artistic director Judith Jerome and executive director Linda Nelson—talked recently about the history, success and future of the facility and its many programs.

Nelson was already a fan of Maine, having attended Bowdoin College in Brunswick, when she first saw the Opera House. She said that, in 1998, she took her friend Judith on a vacation to Maine. They had a mutual friend, Carol Estey, whose father headed the French Camp in Deer Isle and whose mother taught ballet. While on the Island they discovered the Opera House perched on a granite ledge overlooking Stonington harbor.

The building had been abandoned for eight years. “It was in dreadful shape,” said Jerome. “The bathroom was rotted, falling off the building, the stage was closed, and many raccoons were living and defecating in the building.” Nelson said there was excessive water damage.

It didn’t take them long, they said, to realize the potential of the structure. They set up Opera House Arts, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization, to qualify for grant aid in their quest to buy, restore and reopen the Opera House. The founding members were Judith Jerome, Linda Nelson, Carol Estey and Linda Pattie. A 12-member board of directors was established and, in later years, a community advisory board. In 1999, Opera House Arts purchased the structure with the aid of two Union Trust Company commercial loans and private contributors.

At the time, Nelson and Jerome lived part of the year in Stonington and the rest in New York. In 2001 they gave up their careers in New York and moved to Stonington. They were full-time volunteers at the Opera House. There was not enough funding to support salaries for either of them, so to support themselves they found local work.

Nelson worked as a reporter and news editor for *Island Advantages* from 2001 to 2003, and Jerome was hired as the librarian at Stonington Public Library. In time, Nelson was able to bring her executive consulting business from New York City, where she had worked for 16 years, to Maine. Jerome, who had a master’s degree in performance studies, continued her schooling and earned a PhD in the field. Nelson said it has only been a couple of years since they have received salaries, and they continue to volunteer a great deal of their time to OHA.

After the purchase, needed repairs were undertaken. They rebuilt the eastern wing, removed a false ceiling, rebuilt the catwalk, replaced the floor at the north end, got the antique projectors running, and installed stage lighting. It was a monumental project they say, but supporters and contributors started donating time and

money to the project.

The first season of Opera House Arts was in 2000. They opened with *Rocky and Bullwinkle* and *Perfect Storm*, two popular movies at the time. They also did live professional theater, including a variety show hosted by Ron Raines, a star of *The Guiding Light* and on Broadway, and featuring Lucine Amara, of the Metropolitan Opera Company, who sang arias.

During the intermission at that first show, when people stepped outside they were blessed with a double rainbow over the harbor, said Jerome. Good things were already happening.

Over the years the muses of all of the performing arts have found a home at Opera House Arts, the directors say. The programs have run the gamut from Shakespeare’s plays, produced in cooperation with Actors Equity, to Masanobu Ikemiya playing with his Ragtime Band, a circus with trapeze artists flying overhead, singers from classical to popular, recreations of the old radio show format in conjunction with WERU Community Radio, and much more.

Opera House Arts has produced original programs such as “Quarryography,” performed at the Settlement Quarry in Stonington, using Rick Weed’s excavator as a main character in the dance performance.

Many local performers have contributed their talents to the stage at the Opera House, and there have been national luminaries as well, including Broadway’s Kevin Gray, off-Broadway’s Alvin Epstein, and author Studs Terkel.

Each year since Opera House Arts opened, the season has expanded, and improvements have been made on the building.

In the 1930s and ’40s, when it was primarily used for a movie theater, there was a heating system. In the 1970s, Michael Connors, who had taken over the theater, made the decision to redo the roof and to make it just a summer seasonal theater, showing movies in the summer. Connors and his partners put the building up for sale in the late 1980s.

In 2005 a boiler was installed by OHA and year-round programming made available. In 2006 the building was fully insulated and steel beams were installed in the tower where scenery is stored. It is called a fly tower because that is where the scenery and back-

drops are hoisted out of sight when not needed. The 1912 lumber used to hold the rigging was no longer strong enough. The steel beams allow for more rigging.

In the early days of Opera House Arts, lighting funds were provided through the Davis Family Foundation. Today OHA receives donations from more than 400 supporters. Anyone wishing to make donations to the program can do so by going to the Stonington Opera House Web site.

Today, the building that was purchased in 1998 for \$90,000 carries a debt of \$100,000 because of all of the improvements. Nelson said there would be no Opera House Arts without the support of Union Trust

See *Resurgence* on page 3



The three phases of the more than century old Stonington Opera House: Russ’s Music Hall, constructed in the late 1880s on the same footprint as the current theater; the “boom town” Opera House which seated 1,000 people, an expansion of the original Music Hall, at the turn of Stonington’s “granite” century; and the current building, on the National Register of Historic Places, as it appeared after reopening in 1912, constructed after the original theater burned to the ground in 1910. Photos courtesy of Opera House Arts

Opera House history recalled by daughter of former owner

by David Walsh

STONINGTON—Norma Tewksbury-Ooghe, now 87, remembers growing up at the Opera House. “People here still call me Norma Tewksbury even though I’ve been a widow for 29 years. My real name is Norma Tewksbury-Ooghe.”

Norma recollected that the original Stonington Opera House was built by Charles Russ in 1893 when Stonington was called Green’s Landing. There were thousands of men living here then, working as stone cutters for the thriving granite quarry industry before the widespread use of cement closed all but one of the quarries.

At first the Opera House consisted of a music hall and a pool hall. “Our housekeeper used to go there all the time. It was expanded to include a theater in 1895. The original complex burned down in 1910 on the same day that fire hydrants were turned on [in town for the first time],” she said. “Because of the hydrants they were able to

save the town, but they lost the Opera House.”

Dr. B. Lake Noyes bought the land and rebuilt the Opera House in 1912. The doctor sold the Opera House to his son, George Howard Noyes, who also ran the Stonington Power Company.

A half-share of the Opera House was bought by Dr. Lewis G. Tewksbury, Norma’s father, a dentist who had filled in for a local dentist in Stonington a number of times and then finally moved to town in 1913. While in Boston, he was active in area theater and did some acting. He had a life-long love of the theater and owned a number of theaters, here, in Trenton and in several other area towns. Although they were businesses, he always considered them his hobby, said Norma.

In 1920, he married Mary, and Norma was born in 1922.

“My dad and Noyes ran the Opera House and sold tickets at night. I remember when I was 8,

See *Early history* on page 2

Imagination Project wins state film award

by David Walsh

STONINGTON—In the back of the Opera House Arts office, the small building on Main Street just below the Opera House itself, a new entity appeared in 2005 called “Imagination Project,” a free public access digital media studio.

This building, the former Union Trust Company and Shepard’s real estate offices, was purchased from Jean (Shepard) Welch by OHA in 2003 with a grant from the S. Donald Sussman Family Foundation.

OHA literature states: “Equipment, assets and resources are free to the public to teach filmmaking and digital media storytelling skills to all ages. The digital media studio is a skill builder for the global economy.”

Local film makers and high school students have taken advantage of the facility.

Tire Tracks, *Island Prom*, *Life by Lobster* and *Off to Do or Die* are some of the documentary films that have come to life as a result of the studio. The original local films have been produced in the studio under the guidance of OHA executive director and producer Linda Nelson. *Tire Tracks* has been screened at the Maine International Film Festival and other independent film festivals nationally. *Island*

Prom was the winner of the Grand Prize Maine Teen Film and Video Festival of 2007. *Off to Do or Die*, a documentary on women’s college rugby by Wren Warner, and *Life by Lobster*, by Iain McCray Martin, a documentary of young lobster fishermen and the choices they make, have received favorable reception wherever they have been shown.

On April 19, OHA was honored for its work in regional independent filmmaking at the Maine Film Academy Awards Gala at Colby College in Waterville. The Maine Film Center noted in a press release, “Opera House Arts at the Stonington Opera House received this year’s award for Best Artistic Direction. This award honors an organization or company in the state of Maine making significant contributions in the area of film exhibition. The Stonington Opera House does this in a unique and wide-ranging way. Their programs involve their relatively isolated island community in film through both the screening of the best in world cinema and the nurturing of local filmmaking through the nonprofit organization’s Imagination Project public access digital media studio.”

To use the studio, contact the Stonington Opera House at 367-2788.



OHA extended its creation of new work into film when Little Deer Isle resident Jerry Kirschenbaum donated to the Opera House a digital media studio and equipment assets. The first award-winning film project to come from the studio was “Tire Tracks” by John Steed in 2006. Video still from “Tire Tracks” courtesy of Opera House Arts

Early history *Continued from page 1*

carrying the cash bag on the way to the Opera House. I sold candy and popped popcorn. I had to handle 10-pound buckets of special flavored butter to cook the popcorn,” Norma related.

“The current owners of the theater found that old popcorn machine and were able to find someone to fix it and they are using it.”

Although the Opera House in Norma’s time was basically a movie theater, it was also used as a vaudeville theater.

“My father bought the seats that are there today. He bought 300 seats, but there are only 250 today. When you lift the seats you will see a wire that is under the seat. That was where you put your felt hat while you watched the show. In the summer it was straw hats.”

She continued, “When I was 12, I used to run the Saturday matinee. I ran the projector, beginning with a Pathé Newsreel, a serial, a cartoon and a movie. The price was a dime or 15 cents. When I got older I sold tickets every night. The theater ran year-round. I can remember on my way home from high school stopping off to turn

up the heat for the evening show.”

Being the ticket-seller gave her a little power as well. “When I sold the tickets I had a rheostat device on the side of the booth to dim or brighten the lights. I would dim the lights to signal the projectionist to start the film and if people were making noise I would brighten the lights and they would quiet down.”

Although decades have passed, she still remembers the crew she worked with. “Then we had three people that ran the movies for us. They were all electricians, Don Webb, Tip McCorison, and Meddie Dunham. Between them they worked out the schedule.”

Norma was also a projectionist. “I knew how to run everything in that theater.”

The Opera House was also where Stonington High School held school plays and graduation ceremonies for many years.

Norma told of the many vaudeville acts that came to Stonington during her youth, acts such as Billy Gladstone and the Sun-Kissed Vanities, who would arrive with 10 performers in

Cadillacs with sunshine and Florida beach scenes painted on the vehicles.

Another performer was Ethel May Shorey and her big show. “When we had finished a show and emptied the theater for the next performance, many of the same people would come back to see the show again,” she said.

Another popular act were Bangor Radio stars, Jimmy and Dick, and their western music band.

Norma had medical training and joined the WAVES during World War II. At one point, her roommate was the daughter of Ernie Pyle, the famous WWII newspaper reporter. After the war she joined her sister, who had taken a job as a stewardess in San Francisco. She went to work for the *San Francisco Examiner* and then switched to the *San Francisco Chronicle* and eventually became head of all classified and display advertising. She continues to summer in Stonington each year.

Norma has many memories of growing up in Stonington, but that is another story for another time.



Norma Tewksbury-Ooghe, whose father owned the Opera House.

Photo courtesy of Debbie Alley

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In 2004, the Opera House combined a group of New York actors, writers, and musicians with island actors, writers, and musicians to create five new plays and two new songs in 24 hours (including a round trip on the Isle au Haut mail boat) called "The Ferry Musicals." From left, Peter Richards, Pierre Diennet, Judith Jerome, and director Caitlin Shetterly on the set of "The Mink" in "Moose Boy." Photo by Linda Nelson



The 2006 Shakespeare in Stonington production was "As You Like It," featuring actor and summer resident Peter Richards in the lead role of Orlando, left; as well as students Galen Koch and Gabriella Rhodeen in nurses' uniforms, back. Photo by Carolyn Caldwell

Resurgence Continued from page 1

Company, which had faith in their dream.

The building, with its unique "fly" for storing scenery, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places on October 16, 1991.

Community effect

During a recent random stroll along Main Street, a number of business owners and their employees expressed their support of the Opera House and its programs.

Tony Bray, the owner of Fisherman's Friend Restaurant, which overlooks the harbor, said he has noticed an influx of customers on days when a performance is scheduled at the Opera House. "I think it helps business," he said.

"We will have an earlier rush of customers for the evening meal. Many of the performances begin around 7 p.m. so they get here early to eat and then attend the performance." Bray said he had been to some of the performances at the Opera House, but due to the nature of the restaurant's hours he doesn't go often; he quickly added that his kids and a number of employees enjoy going to the Opera House.

Down the street at the Harbor Café, waitress Stephanie Alley said, "We get hit real hard. Some people come in especially on movie nights because we give out free movie passes for the Opera House. With a pass you only pay \$1 to see a movie."

At the Isalos Fine Art Gallery, owner Michael Daugherty said, "We get people directly before or returning from a performance at the Opera House." He said the Opera House creates a climate in the town that sets a

tone for people, especially for those who live here year-round. "It is an accumulative effect. It has created a climate for the arts to flourish and has opened doors for other artists. It makes it easier to live here year-round."

Barrett Gray, owner of Boyce's Motel, said he gets business year-round as a result of the Opera House. "Some plan their vacations around performances, especially the Shakespeare plays. We've put up some of the actors and actresses. Some performers have stayed at the motel for some winter presentations; the 11 units at the motel are all winterized. The Opera House is a great asset for Stonington, absolutely. The jazz festival is also good for the town."

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It's difficult to remember the abandoned and deteriorating state the theater was in, in 1999—with daylight coming through the walls during restoration work, above, and the need to clean out a family of raccoons and lots of debris. Among the work done: rebuild the northwest corner of the building; install two new, handicapped accessible bathrooms; create a fire exit to meet local state codes; reshingle and reroof the entire facility; install steel girders in the historic fly; build a public-access community walkway and completely insulate the theater and install an energy-efficient heating system to allow year-round programming. Photos courtesy of Opera House Arts



Avis Haskell and Lloyd Brimigion kick up their heels at an early radio show at the Opera House. Photo by Linda Nelson



OHA's 10th Anniversary Staff 2009: From left, front row, founding Executive Director Linda Nelson, Island Institute Fellow, Emma Miran; Technical Intern, Hannah Gotwals; middle, Office Manager, Liz Alley, founding Artistic Director Judith Jerome, Assistant Technical Director Jake Adams; back, 35 mm film projectionist Annie Harris, House Manager Penny Frost, Technical Intern Sam Coombs, Program Manager Jennifer Morrow. Missing: Assistant House Manager Heidi Grego; and Assistant Film Projectionists Corinne Sewall and Annie Ames. Photo courtesy of Opera House Arts

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STONINGTON—Opera House Arts will mark its 10th anniversary the way it all began, by presenting its 10th annual benefit gala and “Shakespeare In Stonington,” a special production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, directed by Julia Whitworth and produced in cooperation with Actors Equity.

On August 14-15, OHA will present the 10th Anniversary Revue, “Looking Forward, Looking Back,” with favorites from past years

from near and far, including community stars.

“Commissioning original new performances relevant to our unique Downeast communities and cultures is a core part of OHA’s mission” says Linda Nelson. In 2006, OHA joined with Island Heritage Trust and Brooksville resident artists Alison Chase, Mia Kanazawa and Nigel Chase to create the first original “story at the quarry,” combining giant puppets, local excavator operator Rick Weed, professional

dancers, community members, and steel pan band music at the Settlement Quarry in “Quarryography,” which premiered in 2007. More than 1,700 people watched the performance. A new story is in development in 2009 and will premiere in 2010—“Q2: Habitat,” with a sneak preview August 7 and 8 in Settlement Quarry.

A key component of every OHA season is its Live for \$5 series of short live performances designed for all ages for the price of a student movie ticket. The program is made possible by generous underwriting of the Whitman Family Foundation. This season’s events include old-

time tunes played by Old Gray Goose, Adele Myers and Dancers, the physical comedy of the Mask Messenger, and a sneak preview of “Burt Dow, Deep Water Man,” a work in progress by Maia Aprahamian and Island students and community members.

The ninth annual Jazz Festival July 24-25 will feature the Danza Quartet and the Roy Campbell Trio.

There’s much more, too much to list here. The full schedule is available at www.operahousearts.org and calendar@penobscotbay-press.com. For information and reservations, call 367-2788.



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In 2003, OHA joined the Reach Performing Arts Center and Seamark Community Arts to launch the annual Island Arts Camp, in its seventh year July 6-10, 2009. Photo by Linda Nelson

Opera House collaborates with community organizations

by David Walsh

STONINGTON—Opera House Arts is not just a performance center located high on a rocky granite cliff overlooking the harbor.

Over the years it has joined with Island and other organizations in support of the community. One example is its collaboration with the Reach Performing Arts Center, Deer Isle-Stonington Elementary School and the Kennedy Performing Arts Center.

Jim Gray, director of the Reach Performing Arts Center at the Island elementary school, said Principal Catherine Ring and Opera House Arts joined together about three years ago to participate in the Kennedy Center Partners in Education Program.

With a grant from the Kennedy Center, they have been able to work as a team to bring the arts into the local school.

Gray said, “We’ve had staff and service days at the school with people from the Kennedy Center.” He said one program brought artists in residence to the school this year to teach faculty members how to integrate drama arts into their classrooms to make learning more exciting.

Another program held in conjunction with Opera House Arts was “Sea of Birds,” presented at the Reach. Sebastienne Mundheim and the White Box Theatre created a three-dimensional story book of paper sculpture, dance, music and puppetry for the community. Part of their work during their residency at the school was working with students to create their own three-dimensional sculpture of driftwood and found objects, which was showcased in the school lobby.


Yet another project was “Burt Dow, Deep Water Man,” a children’s opera version of Robert McCloskey’s classic Maine tale. Composer Maia Aprahamian of California (who Island residents may know as May Williams’ daughter) was an artist in residence, holding workshops and classes with the children in the development of the opera.

Gray said that Opera House Arts and the school have put together a good collaboration. In fact, he added, all of the arts groups in the area work well together.

Ring said the school’s collaboration with Opera House Arts has allowed them to integrate arts of high quality into the school curriculum.

Having a theater in the school, said Ring, enables students to pick up technical skills not offered in other schools.

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