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A Reborn Music Hall Embraces Diverse Programs



Richard Harbus for The New York Times

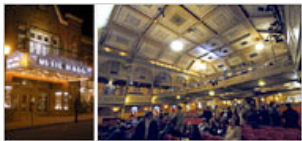
A FULL CALENDAR Karina E. Ringeisen and Bjorn Olsson hold the doors to Tarrytown Music Hall for patrons.

By ROBERTA HERSHENSON Published: January 22, 2009

Tarrytown

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Richard Harbus for The New York Times

Tarrytown Music Hall with its distinctive Queen Anne-style brickwork facade, left, and the interior of the historic hall, featuring 843 seats.

STANDING on the stage of the Tarrytown Music Hall, Bjorn Olsson, the theater's executive director, sang out in a rich baritone. A former opera singer, he was not performing but demonstrating the 124-year old theater's virtues. "You can see the eye whites of the people in the back rows," the Swedish-born Mr. Olsson said. The acoustics, he added, were terrific.

The Music Hall, a historic landmark that once faced the wrecking ball, is experiencing a resurgence. "Almost every day there's something going on here," Mr. Olsson said, noting that the Music Hall produces roughly half the events, while the rest are put on by groups renting the theater. Programs range from performances by edgy singer-songwriters, jazz masters and pop groups to youth shows catering to some 30,000 schoolchildren a year.

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This week's typically diverse presentations include a classical concert by the Westchester Symphonic Winds on Jan. 25; "Annie Jr.," a musical produced by Random Farms Kids Theater, opening on Jan. 30; and a recital by the Fred Astaire Dance Studio on Jan. 31.

Since Mr. Olsson and Karina E. Ringeisen, the theater's manager, took over in 2003, programming has more than tripled, community groups have stepped forward with major gifts and the budget of the nonprofit organization has jumped to more than \$2 million from \$130,000.

Mr. Olsson and Ms. Ringeisen, a former musical theater dancer and actress, are also life partners who gave up artistic careers to become the theater's first professional staff members in decades. After meeting on tour in Germany in 2000, Ms. Ringeisen said they "got serious" about the Music Hall soon after becoming serious about each other. She has a childhood connection to the place; in 1980 her parents, Helen and Berthold Ringeisen, stepped in to prevent the deteriorating building from being turned into a parking lot.

The 843-seat theater, with its distinctive Queen Anne-style brickwork facade, was built in 1885 as a hall for concerts, flower shows and vaudeville, later becoming a first-run movie house. The interior combines Victorian and Art Deco design with unusual touches like stenciled patterns, murals and silhouetted figures made of plywood. Jeffrey Greene, president of EverGreene Painting Studios, a leading theater restoration company based in Manhattan, described the theater as "totally unique and full of personality, with its 1920s decoration shoehorned into a Victorian building."

When the theater closed in 1976, a victim of multiplexes, the village considered razing it to create parking spaces. Enter the Ringeisens and the Friends of the Mozartina Musical Arts organization, the nonprofit arm of the Mozartina Musical Arts Conservatory in Tarrytown, which Helen Ringeisen directs. They bought the music hall for \$130,000, and the couple mortgaged their house as security. "It was just insanely gutsy," Mr. Olsson said. "They had no experience running theaters."

Helen Ringeisen, a piano teacher at the conservatory, said she and her husband could not stand by while the theater was destroyed. "We had gone there for movies and always loved the Music Hall," she said. "I had my teachers go down and try out the acoustics for voice and instruments. One singer said it was one of the few halls that wrapped around her with its wonderful acoustics." Mr. Ringeisen, a professor of humanities and languages, died in 2007.

The Friends group received a tax exemption from the Village of Tarrytown and repaired the deteriorating building through a series of grants and loans. The Ringeisens and other volunteers did much of the work with their own hands, securing a listing on the National Register of Historic Places and reopening the theater as a rental house. Helen Ringeisen, who still does volunteer bookkeeping for the Music Hall, recalled cleaning the theater until two in the morning while Karina, a young child, slept curled up on the seats.

"I thought, this is a very strange childhood," Helen Ringeisen said. "But she loved it. She got to meet Ginger Rogers and watch her direct 'Babes in Arms.' Sometimes she missed a little school, but she got a different kind of education." Karina Ringeisen recalled ushering and selling refreshments, and noticing that her parents never went out for dinner parties.

Now she and Mr. Olsson spend many nights working at the theater, although professionals clean it. The couple have restored the neon marquee, installed a high-quality sound system and last year replaced a 1940s air-conditioning system with a new one, thanks to a \$20,000 grant from the Junior League and other contributions. In 2007 the Music Hall took out two mortgages to buy the property behind the theater to be used for a loading dock and parking, among other things. Mr. Olsson said future projects include replacing the seats (many of which are held together by tape), fixing the floors and repairing old water damage. Current projects include updating the bathrooms and completing a master plan in time for the theater's 125th anniversary next year.

While some of the Music Hall's income is derived from rental fees — both from presenters and businesses occupying street-level space in the building — most of it comes from ticket sales, which rose 25 percent from 2007 to 2008, Ms. Ringeisen said. One group, Premier Performing Arts, a professional musical theater group, canceled its performances in December because of poor ticket sales, but the calendar for the coming months is full.

Mr. Olsson exudes confidence despite the economic climate. "The theater is still an inexpensive pleasure," he said.



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Tarrytown Music Hall, 13 Main Street, Tarrytown. To reserve tickets:(877) 840-0457. For other information: (914) 631-3390. A calendar of events is available at tarrytownmusichall.org.

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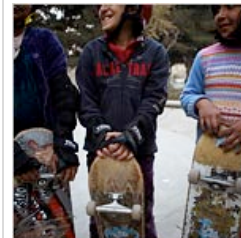
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