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Hiding in Plain Sight



Christian Hansen for The New York Times

OperaOggiNY will move into a long overlooked 600 seat auditorium in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

By JAKE MOONEY

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THOMAS LAWRENCE TOSCANO, artistic director of the fledgling OperaOggiNY, lived in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, for 12 years starting in 1993, and has been in nearby Williamsburg since then. Over the years, he became well acquainted with the local churches; he stages performances in churches all the time.

“It’s much easier than trying to get into theaters,” Mr. Toscano, who has long gray hair and a bushy beard, said the other day. “Plus, we don’t have any budget.”

Over the summer, Mr. Toscano was casting around for a space for the company’s latest production, Franco Leoni’s “L’Oracolo,” when his inquiries led him to the Rev. Richard Beuther, the pastor at SS. Peter and Paul [Roman Catholic Church](#) on South Second Street.

“Father Rick said, ‘You have to come and look at what we have,’ ” Mr. Toscano recalled. The response struck him as strange; he had seen the church many times. What more was there?

When the two men finally met, the pastor led Mr. Toscano not inside the church but around the corner, to the parish’s dormant former school on Berry Street. Mr. Toscano, who had been walking past the building for years, knew that structure, too — at least he thought he did. But when Father Beuther took him up a flight of back stairs, past chipping paint and through a metal fire door, Mr. Toscano could scarcely believe what he saw.

At his feet was a 50-foot-wide stage, tilted forward in the Shakespearean style and topped by an intricately detailed proscenium arch. Stretching out before him was enough space to accommodate

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an area under the balcony was walled off with red plywood. But all Mr. Toscano saw was potential.

"I said: 'This is enormous! This is unbelievable!'" Mr. Toscano recalled. "You can't build a theater like this these days. Who's got a billion dollars?"

Since the school closed in 2002, the hall, which actually takes up most of the building, though it is practically invisible from the outside, had been used mostly for the church's annual Christmas pageant.

But the space had a long history. Opened in 1898 and christened McCaddin Memorial Hall, it thrived as a space for political rallies and speeches, but was soon converted to house a school.

As for the hall itself, "I mostly remember playing basketball there," said Esteban Duran, a local community board member who grew up in the neighborhood and who introduced Mr. Toscano to Father Beuther.

As it happened, the pastor had been thinking about doing something new with the space. After some quick talks with Mr. Toscano, it was settled: "L'Oracolo" would be staged there. As for the future, both sides would keep an open mind.

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That was in September, and Mr. Toscano has been busy ever since, researching the hall's history, patching holes in the stage, putting new bulbs into the chandelier and the footlight systems (both still work) and trying to persuade potential investors that the space can be restored. The opera, meanwhile, is scheduled to begin its three-day run on Thursday.

Last Wednesday afternoon, as workmen were trundling a rented piano up the stairs, Mr. Toscano was still marveling that the hall, unknown to much of Williamsburg's cultural community, had been hiding under his nose.

"There's a phrase in Portuguese: 'The saint that you live with doesn't really make miracles,'" he said. "Basically, that's what happened here. They don't understand what they have. This is not something I'm saying in criticism; it's human nature."

What they have, he said, is a hall that is hungry for music.

"You want to hear something incredible?" Mr. Toscano said. He pounded out a chord on the piano and gazed up at the rafters, wide-eyed and grinning, as the sound echoed.

"This is an instrument," he said later, gesturing to the space around him. "And that's what's amazing about my experience in this theater the last two months. The instrument is coming back to life. Sitting here, the sun goes down, it starts to get dark, and you start to feel the theater. The walls begin to wake up, and it begins to remember what it's here for."

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