

Opera house thrives with local support

By Kari J. Bodnarchuk
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BOOTHBAY HARBOR, Maine — The Opera House of Boothbay Harbor stands on the north end of town, a beacon that has drawn visitors and performers from around the world and served as the community’s social center for more than 100 years. Commissioned by the Knights of Pythias in 1894, the four-story, New England-style meetinghouse was built by shipwrights in just 70 days.

The Pythian Opera House, as it was then called, has a grand hall with wide, creaky stairs leading up to the mezzanine, and a gallery on the second floor with 16-foot ceilings and chair and picture rails. The bar area has a large mahogany mantel, old-style lollipop-shape globes hanging from the ceiling, and a raised, scalloped floor around its perimeter. Symbols on the bar’s tin ceiling — K for knights, F for friendship, and so on — are reminiscent of the days when this was the Pythians’ main meeting hall.



KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Opera House of Boothbay Harbor has been put to a wide range of uses, including a roller-skating rink and a bed-and-breakfast, since it was built in 1894.

The overall feeling was that for the opera house to thrive, we needed to get rid of the mortgage.”

The race was on and board members made a plea to the community. They went door-to-door and passed the hat at shows throughout the summer.

“It was pretty much old-fashioned fundraising,” explained Sherrill. “Little kids would come in with pennies, nickels, and dimes, and seniors would come in with \$10 saying they wished they could do more.”

Pulitzer Prize-winner Richard Ford and his wife, Kristina, local residents, know Mark Knopfler, former lead singer of Dire Straits, and asked him to play a benefit concert at the opera house. He agreed and even footed the bill for the whole event, flying over from England and bringing other musicians up from Tennessee.

“He doesn’t perform much and his fans are devoted,” said Sherrill. “People came from as far away as Italy, Switzerland, New Zealand, and the Yukon. It was one of those moments in a small town when you knew something big was going on.”

The Knopfler concert in September raised more than \$150,000, but the group still had \$125,000 to go before the deadline.

“Those last 10 days, we were out shaking the tin cups wildly,” said Sherrill.

The morning of Sept. 30, they were still \$18,000 short. Then a family that was moving into town and had never set foot in the opera house came forward and made the final donation that put them over the mark, with just sev-

en hours to spare.

Now, the group can focus on building renovations and programming.

“We’ve been trying to figure out what the community wants, so we’ve had a real diverse mix of shows and performers,” said Malcom.

In the past three years, the 600-seat house has hosted comedy shows, children’s programs, barbershop quartets, a Maine humor series, professional and community theater productions, and Latin, Cuban, big band, rock, blues, country, choral, and folk performances.

“It’s one of the best stages I’ve performed on,” said Kate Schrock, a Portland-based singer/songwriter who has recorded live at the opera house and has helped book events there over the last year. “Acoustically, it’s very warm, live, and present.”

The opera house also provides performance space for local arts groups. Cooking shows for a local television station have been filmed in the building’s commercial kitchen. The Gallery, a large room on the second floor, is used for tai chi and dance classes, workshops, parties, and other gatherings, and as a rehearsal space. And the bar area now hosts open-mike nights and other more intimate events.

“I’ve watched how community members, young and old alike, have come together in this place and it’s wonderful to see,” said Malcom. “You just can’t tear an old lady like this down.”

Kari J. Bodnarchuk, a Portland, Maine-based writer and photographer, can be reached at travelwriter@karib.us.

If you go . . .

The Opera House at Boothbay Harbor
86 Townsend Ave.
Boothbay Harbor
207-633-6855
boothbayoperahouse.org
Upcoming events: Ellis Paul, Jan. 12; Asleep at the Wheel, Feb. 3; “Grease,” performed by CLICK, Feb. 12-17; Catie Curtis, March 2; Jonathan Edwards (Lisa McCormack

opens), March 10; Richie Havens, April 5; the Maine Photography Show May 1-13; Jorma Kaukonen (Hot Tuna opens), May 6; Dave Mallet, June 2; Portland String Quartet, June 10; Lincoln Arts’ jazz weekend, July 20-21; Steve Janes and Ernie Hawkins, Aug. 18; Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes Block Party, Aug. 31. Big Old Labs, a nonprofit oceanographic group, runs Cafe Scientific in the barroom at the opera house, where scientists give weekly lectures in the summer.

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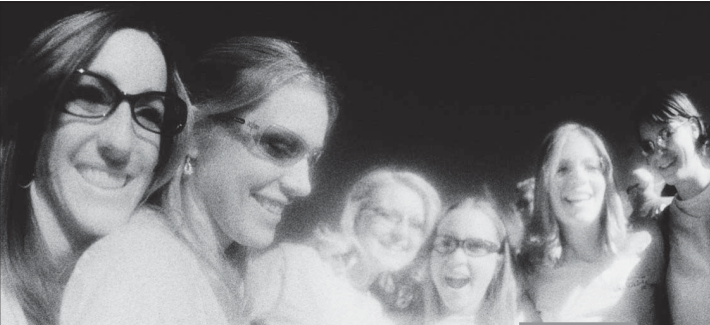
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