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The Berkshire Eagle

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Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Monday, August 7, 2000



Lawrence Gadd, who is negotiating to buy the historic Mahaiwe Theatre, wants to see the theater renovated and used year-round, not shut down for part of the year. Above, the view from the stage.

Spotlight on Mahaiwe

Prospective owner willing to sell it for price he pays

By Timothy Q. Cebula
and Derek Gentile

Berkshire Eagle Staff

GREAT BARRINGTON — Bolstered by encouraging reports from their consulting architect, Berkshire Opera Company board members aim to make the historic Mahaiwe Theatre their new home, and perhaps even buy the property.

This new twist to the story of the suddenly red-hot Mahaiwe Theatre, said prospective owner Lawrence Gadd, would be fine with him, as long as the theater is renovated and remains open for the winter.

"My goal," said Gadd, owner of North River Press on Main Street, "is to preserve the theater and keep it open during the winter for the community. If public money can do it, so be it. If it gets done with private funding, that's fine, too."

Still negotiating

Gadd said Friday that he is still negotiating with Hoyts to purchase the theater. But, he said, he has spoken with the boards of directors of both Berkshire Opera Company and Barrington Stage Company about potential leasing arrangements. Gadd is a former member of the board of directors of Berkshire Opera Company.

He noted that once negotiations with Hoyts were complete, he would have no problem selling the theater for what he paid for it.

"Nobody seems to believe this, but my interest is in saving a valuable community resource — for the community," he said. "I don't want to see the theater purchased by an organization and shut down for half the year. So any sale agreement with me would include keeping the theater open during the winter. I don't want to make money on this. The point is to keep the Mahaiwe open. So let's fix it up and keep it open."



A dressing room backstage at the Mahaiwe Theatre is so dilapidated that it looks like a set for a movie or play about the Great Depression era.

To that end, about a dozen opera company board members toured the theater Saturday along with their architect, Hugh Hardy of the New York firm Hardy, Holzman & Pfeiffer. Hardy has reviewed the structure with engineers, and he gave the board members an idea of what it would take to renovate and use the 95-year-old facility.

"The board members asked a lot of questions. I think they heard what they wanted to hear," said Sanford H. Fisher, director of the Berkshire Opera Company. "We heard what an extraordinary jewel it is. It's in good shape. For a reasonable

amount of money and in a reasonable amount of time, the Mahaiwe can be returned to its original grandeur, and it can be returned to the town not only as the home of the Berkshire Opera Company, but for plays, film festivals, concerts and use by people of all ages."

Fisher did not disclose an estimate of how much the renovations would cost, but said the project could be completed in about three years. Among the top priorities would be new heating and air-conditioning systems, upgrade of the electrical wiring, improvement of toilet facilities

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Guinness used his own facial shorthand — the faint curling of a lip, a seemingly apologetic furrowing of the brow, the quizzical upturn of an eyebrow, the slight but visible widening of the eyes in disbelief, a sudden brief smile that could radiate approval or signify chilly disdain. Particularly in motion-picture close-up, he did not so much act as allow his face to react to what another actor was saying.

He was the antithesis of the personality player or star, for he accepted small and large roles that ranged from the starkly dramatic to the predictably melodramatic to the maniacally whimsical.

“Everything I’ve done has been on the spur of the moment,” the actor said some years ago. “That’s why my career has been so haphazard.”

Notable career

Haphazard or not, it was a notable career, one in which Guinness triumphed in the theater in roles as startlingly dissimilar as Hamlet and the suave psychiatrist in T.S. Eliot’s “Cocktail Party.” He was the drink-sodden and doomed Welsh poet Dylan Thomas in Sidney Michaels’ biographical drama “Dylan” and the tragically broken and brain-

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and whatever alterations were needed to make the facility handicapped accessible.

The theater would not be shut down for the whole duration of the project, Fisher said. In fact, he said Berkshire Opera Company may be able to hold performances there within two years.

“The Berkshire Opera Company has been looking for a home for 16 years,” Fisher said. Since its founding in 1984, Berkshire Opera Company has made camp at venues throughout the county, including a chapel at Cranwell Resort in Lenox, Monument Mountain Regional High School in Great Barrington and Berkshire Community College, where the company is now located.

A permanent home with adequate resources would allow Berkshire Opera Company to expand its repertoire, Fisher said. The company is currently limited as to what operas it can produce because the orchestra pit at the BCC stage holds only 32 musicians. Many of the best-known operas call for anywhere from 50 to 70 musicians, Fisher said.

More operas possible

Moreover, working out of the Mahaiwe would allow Berkshire Opera Company to offer more operas more frequently. Developing such a repertory theater would help the company build an even larger following, Fisher said.

“This would be an enormous boon for cultural tourism in the Berkshires,” Fisher said.

The Berkshire Opera Company would do most of its work at the Mahaiwe between June and August, putting on a few performances at other times in the year as well. Fisher said that a return of opera to the Mahaiwe is fitting, pointing out that the opening performance at the theater in 1905 was the comic opera “Happyland.”

Beyond the opera season, Fisher said if the company owned the property, it would “actively encourage” area organizations to use the Mahaiwe as a performance and entertainment space. He said he hoped places like Club Helsinki, for instance, would continue to sign acts to appear in the Mahaiwe. The club has booked Maceo Parker for the venue Aug. 17.

“We’re really serious about doing this, and doing it right,” Fisher said. “And I can’t emphasize enough that we really do care about returning this to the community.”

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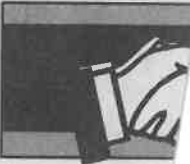
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