

By DB Leonard and Timothy Malcolm
Photos by Philip Kamrass

■ THE CAST OF “A CHRISTMAS CAROL” huddled on stage at the Woodstock Playhouse. The stage had been enclosed for about a year, but it didn’t stop actors from crossing their arms together, chattering and shivering.

“Oh, it just got really cold. Did you feel that?”

Instinctively they looked for the source of the cold, which led them to the back of the theater. With old sites there lingers the idea that a spirit resides in the space, and in the Playhouse it seemed possible. Maybe in the back of the theater the spirit is seated, watching over the Woodstock Playhouse.

Douglas Farrell, founding member of the New York Conservatory of the Arts, believes the spirit – or really, simply, a spirit – stirs underneath the venue, swarming near the floorboards and waiting for the right time to re-emerge. But there are times the spirit rises, maybe even into a performer.

Most visitors drive on Route 375 until it reaches Route 212. Turn left and you head into Woodstock. The Woodstock Playhouse is the first thing these visitors see. This third edition of the Playhouse stands rotund, painted in brilliant green against a beautiful blanket of trees. It is enclosed, unlike its past editions.

The first Playhouse, built in 1929, stood on the current Woodstock Country Club and Golf Course. After nearly two years of operation it burned to the ground.

A second playhouse was constructed in 48 days, opening in 1938 at the current Mill Hill Road site.

“The play was secondary; people just gawked,” says Richard Heppner, Woodstock’s town historian for the last 13 years.

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Ruins & REBIRTH

Woodstock Playhouse celebrates 75 tumultuous and inspirational years

The Woodstock Playhouse is “the seed of Woodstock itself,” says Douglas Farrell, company manager of the Woodstock Playhouse, pictured with Richard Heppner, Woodstock town historian.

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"The theater was the primary show that night."

The Playhouse lasted 50 years, accumulating a storied history of acclaimed performers and productions, legendary music feats and lasting memories for all who walked inside its doors. Weeks after earning its status as a New York historic place, on the morning of May 30, 1988, the Playhouse again caught fire. The blaze destroyed the building.

Twenty-five years later the third Woodstock Playhouse is running strong. It is literally resurrected from ashes and this summer celebrates its 75th year.

Robert Elwyn's risky venture

The Playhouse was the vision of Robert

Elwyn, a member of one of the oldest families of Woodstock.

"Elwyn is interesting," says Heppner. "He comes out of the Maverick, which was more avant-garde in some respects, wanting to do professional theater in a much bigger way. I think of Elwyn as showbiz. In the middle of the Depression, he took chances."

By 1941 the Playhouse had generated enough success to be featured in the New York Times with the headline "The Theatre Along Broadway and its Rural Extension" replete with an illustration of Elwyn and cast by Al Hirschfeld. Indeed, this could be the mission statement for the Playhouse, both then and now, for it has served as a formidable connection both to and from Broadway. At the core of its programming

"I think of (Robert) Elwyn as showbiz. In the middle of the Depression, he took chances."

RICHARD HEPPNER

Woodstock's town historian

was summer stock, a combination of musical theater and dramatic plays, presenting far-ranging works from "Julius Caesar" to "Cabaret." The Woodstock Playhouse was one of the oldest theaters in America to present such offerings. The summer stock offerings employed both established veteran actors and upstart students grinding out the warm months trying to impress theatergoers.

One of these early performers was Carol Viglielmo, who alongside her husband,

Jules, performed on the Playhouse stage in 1955. They have remained in Woodstock ever since, close to the energy that bound them.

"Much of the spirit evolved from the Maverick Theater, where you could get in for a can of beans," says Carol Viglielmo. "I'm not kidding."

And that can of beans, or whatever money that was raised, would go to the actors and other artists.

"It was the most important thing in the town," Carol Viglielmo says. "This was the hub, the start for so many artists."

Harold G. Baldridge, the artistic director under Edgar Rosenblum, who bought the Playhouse in 1960, directed between 60 and 70 productions between the summers of 1965 and 1972. Teaching at the Neighborhood Playhouse in Manhattan, he brought several of his students to the Playhouse. One was Diane Keaton.

"She had been a student of mine," said Baldridge. "She graduated in May 1965 at the Neighborhood Playhouse. I took her up there. She played in 'Oklahoma!' with an itty-bitty part. She was just a young graduate out of school. And then she played Cecily in 'The Importance of Being Earnest.' I gave her her first job."

Keaton famously followed her stint at the Playhouse with roles on Broadway and on film, perhaps becoming a muse herself for the likes of Woody Allen.

Other performers that have graced its stage include Estelle Parsons, Larry Hagman, Chevy Chase and Judd Hirsch.

Creating a musical legacy

Baldridge credits Rosenblum as "a very far-seeing producer." Together they developed a flurry of productions; eight or nine plays every summer season, which included two musicals.

"Because of Edgar, we tried to raise the standards and choose plays that were more demanding," says Baldridge. "It was not the usual lightweight summer froth."

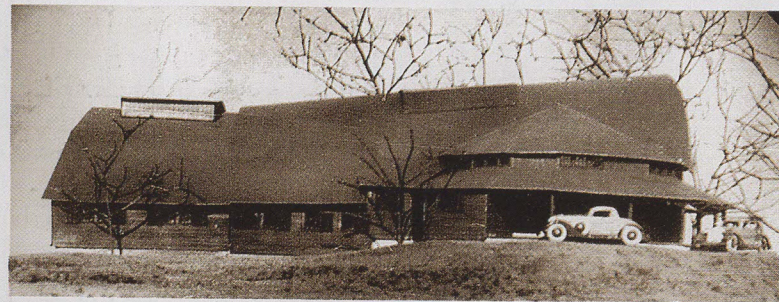
What were the ingredients that created such magic?

"Part of it was the '60s. We were all a little crazy, I guess, which helped. Edgar had an eye for what was good on the stage, which led all of us to celebrate that with the Playhouse and do more than we might

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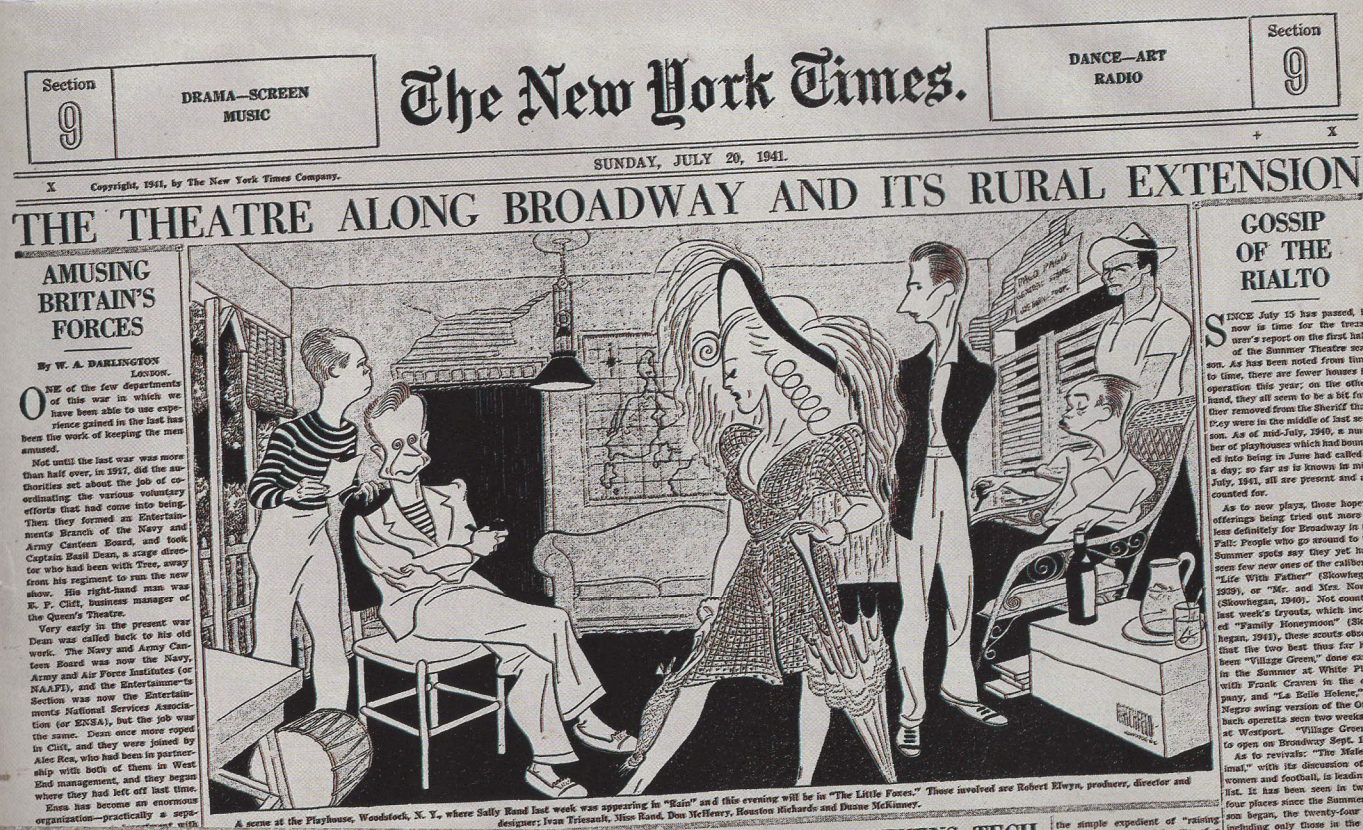


Baldridge



Above, images of the Woodstock Playhouse in 1938. Below, The New York Times in 1941 declared the Playhouse Broadway's rural extension.

Photos courtesy of Historical Society of Woodstock



The Playhouse holds 321 seats on a tiered floor; on the stage is the set for Disney's "The Little Mermaid," a children's show that was performed in the spring.



"This was the hub, the start for so many artists," says Carol Viglielmo, inside the theater with Douglas Farrell. Viglielmo performed at the Playhouse in 1955, and remains in Woodstock.

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have done in any other situation. He also had an eye on what was good for his community" – which actually extended beyond the theater.

"Edgar Rosenblum took part in the '60s foment," says Ed Sanders, a poet, activist, leader of the rock band the Fugs, and a Woodstock resident since 1974. "He sponsored benefits and concerts and also put on civil rights speeches. There was a big controversy in the Town of Woodstock in the late '60s over the 'hippie problem.' He sided with the long hairs."

This included, of course, the musicians.

A series of midnight concerts were arranged under the direction of Rosenblum, featuring Pete Seeger, Artie and Happy Traum, Dave Van Ronk, Tim Hardin and Ramblin' Jack Elliott. Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary would perform onstage on Saturday mornings. "Jocco" Moffitt, who started the Sound-Outs, held his final Sound-Out



The Playhouse was used by the Band to record "Stage Fright" for Capitol Records.

performance at the Woodstock Playhouse in 1968, showcasing Richie Havens and others. One year later, down the road a bit, there would be another happening with the name of Woodstock. Havens opened.

In 1970 the Band recorded its third studio album, "Stage Fright," at the Playhouse. Todd Rundgren engineered it. And through the decades the Playhouse would host chamber music and opera, always in tune with the town's influence on the greater music culture. The Playhouse transcended genres to connect some of the most talented players in the community with the consciousness of the country itself.

Rosenblum sold the property in 1972 to Harris Gordon, who continued producing live theater. The Playhouse changed hands again in 1986, sold to Ralph Miller, a magnate who owned the Pocono Playhouse in Mountainhome, Pa., the Falmouth Playhouse in Falmouth, Mass., and the Bucks County Playhouse in New Hope, Pa. Af-

ter one failed season Miller's Woodstock Playhouse went dark for the first time since World War II.

'One of the darkest days in Woodstock'

At 4:39 a.m. May 30, 1988, a neighbor reported "popping and noise" at the Woodstock Playhouse. More than 50 firefighters from Woodstock, Saugerties and West Hurley fought the blaze until it was controlled six hours later. The entire property was destroyed.

An investigation uncovered the presence of a "pour pattern" on a concrete pad near a storage area, leading the Ulster County Arson Task Force to conclude the fire was incendiary in origin.

"I acquired inside information about the State Police investigation of the fire, and it was definitely an arson," claims Sanders. "There was a handprint, outlined in fire, from the arson attempt on a plank they found."

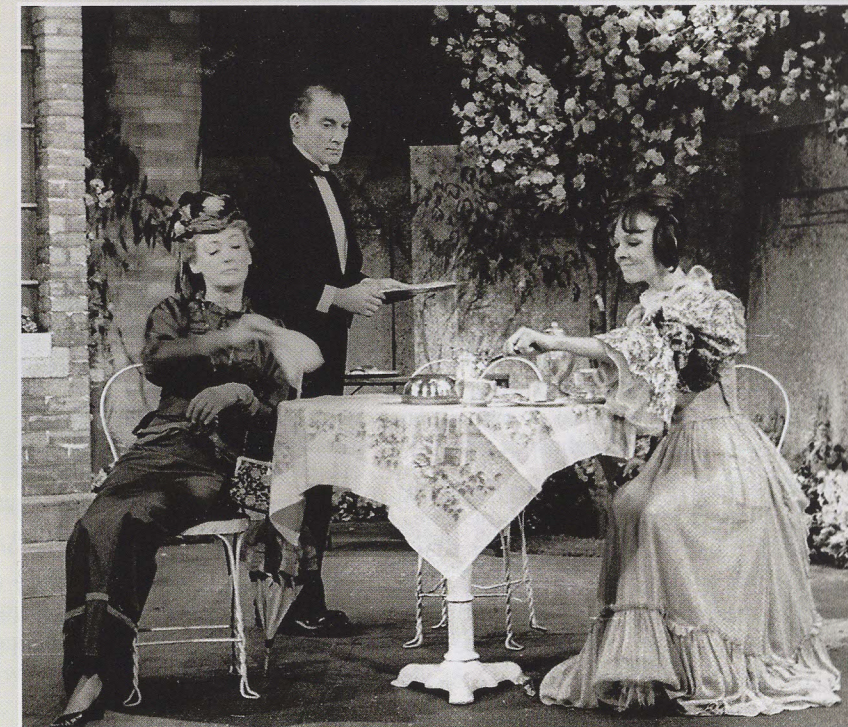
Nobody was charged with the crime. Miller's Falmouth Playhouse burned to the ground in similar fashion in 1994. His Pocono Playhouse burned down in 2009.

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Past Playhouse players



John Glover and Mercedes Ruehl in "Private Lives," Noel Coward's 1930 comedy of manners. Photo courtesy of Konnie Kittrell



Jane Lloyd Jones and Diane Keaton in "The Importance of Being Earnest," performed at the theater in the 1960s. Roland Van Zandt photo courtesy of Cornelia Rosenblum

Playhouse remembrances

Here are a few memories of Woodstock's treasured theater by those whose lives it touched:

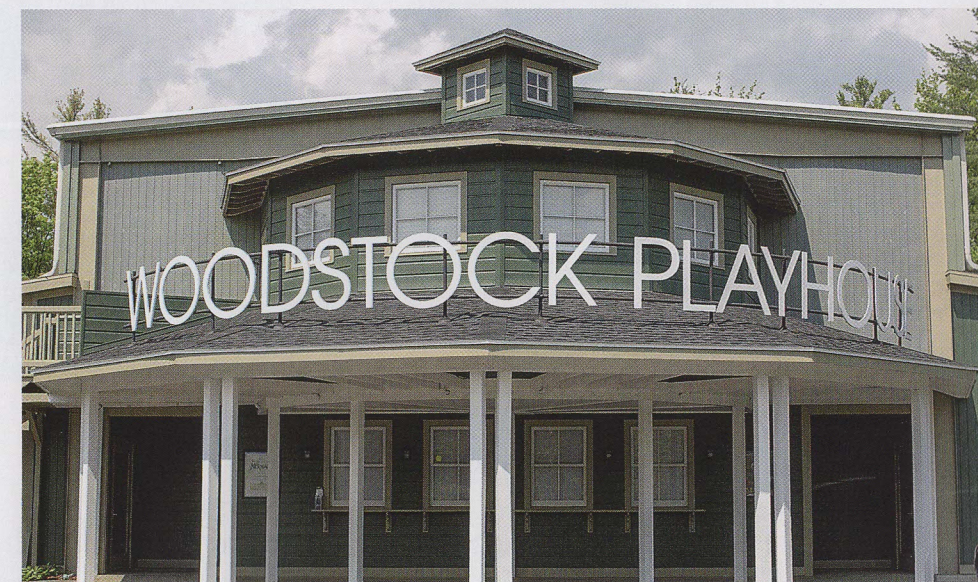
"THE WOODSTOCK PLAYHOUSE is a venerable institution of huge importance to Woodstock. We were devastated when it burned in 1988. Along with the rest of Woodstock, we did what we could to help it make its way back, and we were thrilled when the New York Conservatory for the Arts took it over and reopened it to great fanfare in June 2011."

Weston and Julia Blelock, Woodstock residents

"THE PLAYHOUSE, THROUGH its many permutations, stands as a symbol of the continuity of our town's deep love affair with the arts and artists. In 1970-ish we took the children to a play; two years ago saw the new building hosting Happy Traum's venerable Winter Solstice music show."

Catherine Sebastian, photographer

"THE WOODSTOCK PLAYHOUSE means everything to me. My mother, Joan, sang there when she was the young beauty queen at New Paltz. My mother's cousin's husband, Lee Marvin, acted there when he was young. My major mentor Bill



Metzo rocked the place in the '70s. My stepfather, John Brown, took us there all summer long for years. I saw the Band and other bands, I opened for Arlo Guthrie at the Playhouse the first time he played in Woodstock. I was part of the building crew that first started rebuilding it after the fire. As the security detail at the Richie Havens concert a few years ago, I was guarding his door, when he

told me I could do it from the inside and just hang out. Some of the most fun I had there was playing at the Woodstock Guitar Festival with Joe Veillette, Harvey Citron, Mike DeMicco ... and I am installing some guitar sculptures there to raise money for them. Some of my favorite memories are inside those walls."

Rennie Cantine, musician

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"In my time in Woodstock, since I was a teenager, the day the theater burned was one of the darkest days in Woodstock," says Heppner.

Adds Baldrige, who heard the news from Canada, "I was devastated."

One month before the fire, a cadre of Woodstock residents and Playhouse supporters had secured the venue's placement on the state Registry of Historic Places. A March 3, 1988, letter from Miller to John Bonafide of the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation requested that the Playhouse not be listed as historic.

"He felt it would have hampered him from selling it for commercial purposes," said Alf Evers, town historian at the time.

After the fire, there were rumors that a commercial building would go on the site. As luck would have it, Sanders already had volunteered to chair a committee to rewrite the Woodstock zoning law.

"My committee unanimously voted to set up a zoning district called the Gateway Overlay District, which required any building activity in that district to have a cultural flavor, a cultural aspect. This or-



The people of Woodstock were devastated when the Playhouse burned in 1988; the blaze was declared an arson. Photo by Ellen Densen

dinance protected the property where the Playhouse stood," says Sanders. "It lay empty for a number of years; all the rubble from the fire was there."

'The seed of Woodstock'

Harris Gordon got the land back from Miller through foreclosure. In the spirit of the Playhouse and the village in which it

resided, Gordon gave it to the town.

The Woodstock Arts Board was established with a specific purpose: to rebuild the Playhouse. It began with a simple stage and outdoor seating. In 2010, seeking funding, the Woodstock Arts Board put out the call. The West Hurley-based New York Conservatory for the Arts, under the auspices of the Pan American Dance Founda-

SPECIAL FEATURES

Our online version presents the Woodstock Playhouse story with audio slideshows, a gallery of past programs and additional photographs. See the story presentation at ulstermagazine.com.

tion, answered.

"We all looked at each other," says Farrell. "There was no question we should do it."

The foundation took out a \$1 million loan, paying back as mortgage.

"It's not about us," says Farrell, who volunteers his time to the Playhouse. "It's about the treasures of the community."

Already, in this, the Playhouse's third incarnation, history is starting to repeat itself. Summer stock has returned in earnest, as the New York Conservatory for the Arts is now presenting its third season of theater. Music has returned, too, with Yarrow even coming back for a performance. Called Legacy Night, the Playhouse fundraiser recalled fond memories of this Woodstock landmark for so many years. And it re-

mains a landmark. Perhaps that is because the essence of the place, its spirit, has never faltered.

"I think it's the seed of Woodstock itself," says Farrell.

In the Playhouse's case, it might take a longer view to appreciate what the seed becomes.

"There's not always instant gratification," says Sanders. "Sometimes it takes years after the seed is planted for the tree to bear almonds."

The doors of the fully renovated Woodstock Playhouse reopened in June 2011.

Nothing remains from the original structure, aside from a few burned Playbills and some splinters of wood a local artist pulled from the devastation to make artwork. Still, like in all the transitions before, the energy has somehow been transferred to the new space.

"That spirit is honestly baked into the ground here," says Farrell. "It's like when a tree grows, whatever is in the ground around it, it absorbs it and brings it in and rebuilds. Everything that was built is coming up through the wood, coming through the beams, breathing into the space itself."



A leaf on the "donor tree" acknowledges the contribution of Harris Gordon, who gave the Playhouse to the town.

WOODSTOCK'S SUMMER STOCK

Here are the Woodstock Playhouse performances scheduled for summer 2013:

June 20-30: "Les Miserables"

July 11-21: "Fiddler on the Roof"

July 25-27: "Biloxi Blues"

August 1-10: "The Who's Tommy"

Visit woodstockplayhouse.org or call 679-6900 from 4-7 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday for more information.

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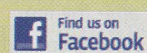
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