

A PALACE FOR THE PEOPLE

“There should be a fountainhead in the city for music and art, and it seems to me that City Center fills that need.”

—Leonard Bernstein, 1945

By ERIC MYERS

Long before there was a Lincoln Center, there was City Center. What started as a Shriners’ Hall in the 1920s blossomed into a people’s palace for the performing arts in the 1940s and, despite a few speed bumps along the way, it’s remained one ever since. Over the course of nearly 65 years, it has given New Yorkers gift after gift of memorable performances in opera, theatre, music, and dance.

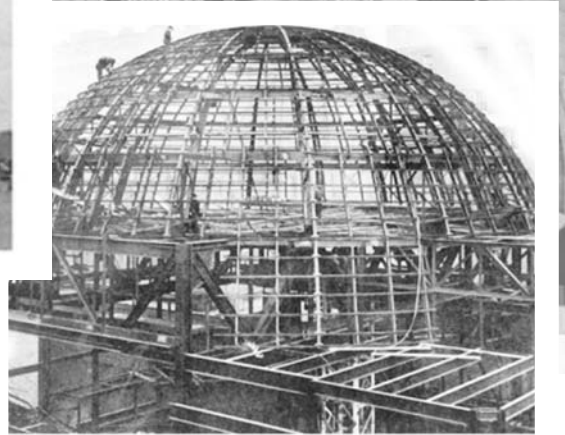
City Center has been with us so long, it almost seems like part of the city’s infrastructure. Just as there are elderly Dodgers fans who still consider that ball club to be the home team of Brooklyn, there are also aged opera buffs who simply cannot bring themselves to call New York City Opera anything other than “City Center Opera,” because that’s what the company’s original name was, and that’s where it got started in 1943. City Center was always an open door for the artistic underdogs, the scrappy companies that charged popular prices and didn’t play by the established rules.





When the Ancient and Accepted Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine built their Mecca Temple meeting hall on West 55th Street in 1924, it was the rival of any of the great movie palaces that lined Times Square. Boasting two balconies and two ornate lobbies, it had a 3000-seat auditorium with a rich, riotous polychromatic decorative scheme. Twenty years of cigar smoke did enough dirty work to the interior that the walls and ceiling eventually got painted over with the dullish brown-and-beige color scheme you see today. But if you look to the left of the stage, at the end of the first balcony, you'll see a small restored patch that shows what's been hidden all these years.

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The Depression eventually took its toll on the building, the Masons defaulted on their taxes, and Mecca Temple was shut down. It would have been demolished were it not for the initiative taken by arts publicist Jean Dalrymple, City Council president Newbold Morris, and Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. What New York needed, they realized, was an all-purpose theatre for the people, where performing arts could be enjoyed at prices accessible to all. Securing funding from local philanthropists, union members, and arts organizations,



they were able to save the building and turn it into the performing arts center we know today.

With LaGuardia himself leading the New York Philharmonic in “The Star-Spangled Banner” on his birthday, December 11, 1943, the newly christened New York City Center opened. It was now the official home of three new companies: New York City Center Opera, New York City Symphony, and New York City Center Theatre. A fourth, the New York City Ballet, would have its inaugural season there five years later. Throughout the 1940s, New Yorkers spending \$1.50



for the top ticket price could experience a dazzling series of cultural events. In addition to all the City Opera, City Ballet, and City Symphony performances (the latter led by Leopold Stokowski and the young Leonard Bernstein), there were visits from the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, the Don Cossack Chorus, and the Paris Opera Ballet. Interspersed among these were such memorable stage events as Gertrude Lawrence in *Susan and God*, Eva Le Gallienne in *The Cherry Orchard*, Tallulah Bankhead in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and Paul Robeson in *Othello*.

And, in an early forerunner of City Center's *Encores!* series, Ms. Dalrymple and company began mounting revivals of Broadway musical hits. Today, the casts for some of these make musical-comedy buffs drool: *Carousel* with Jo Sullivan and Barbara Cook (1954), *Oklahoma!* with Ms. Cook and Florence Henderson (1953), *Pal Joey* with Bob Fosse (1961), *Guys and Dolls* with Alan King, Sheila MacRae, Jerry Orbach, and Anita Gillette (1965), *Wonderful Town* with Nancy Walker (1958), Kaye Ballard (1963), and Elaine Stritch (1967).

But the talent was not just onstage. Three other smaller Masonic halls within the building were constantly in use as rehearsal studios. And during the 1950s, one of the building's sixth-floor office spaces held the team of young geniuses who wrote the scripts for Sid Caesar's hit TV series "Your Show of Shows." Among them were Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, and Neil Simon. Simon went on to immortalize those years in his Broadway show *Laughter on the 23rd Floor* starring Nathan Lane.

By the late 1960s, City Center was in trouble. There was no denying that the newly-built Lincoln Center had stolen its thunder—and its audiences. The cost of producing live musical and theatrical events had spiraled, and at the same time the city's economic fortunes were going into a free-fall. The municipal economic crisis of 1975 seemed to spell doom for the building, which came close to being bulldozed for a parking structure. ***continued on page 37***



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Once again, a dedicated coterie of arts aficionados came to its aid. Four of the city's major dance companies—American Ballet Theater, Alvin Ailey, the Joffrey, and Eliot Feld—began playing regular seasons there. The City Center 55th Street Theater Foundation was formed to ensure its survival as a non-profit organization, and the Foundation's chairman Howard Squadron led a movement that helped the building finally attain landmark status.

Since then, the fortunes of City Center have been on a continuous upswing. Manhattan Theatre Club moved into the large underground space



and created two separate theaters from which such memorable plays as *Proof* and *The Tale of the Allergist's Wife* made the leap to Broadway and became long-running hits. Under the ten-year leadership of Judith Daykin, the City Center *Encores!* series was created, and it remains one of the city's unique musical theatre treasures. Since it began in 1994, *Encores!* has presented concert performances of 43 different Broadway musicals ranging from the obscure (Irving Berlin's *Face the Music*) to the classic (*Bye, Bye, Birdie*) and featuring such luminaries as Brian Stokes Mitchell, Patti LuPone, and Kristin Chenoweth, to name just a few. Season tickets to *Encores!* have become such a prized commodity among New Yorkers that they figure in wills and even divorce settlements.

Recently, the New York Gilbert and Sullivan Players joined the list of dance and musical-theatre offerings at City Center. More than ever, City Center is living up to its original wide, varied, cultural agenda established 67 years ago.

Under its current president and CEO Arlene Shuler, New York City Center now boasts an active performance schedule of over 40 weeks per year. Shuler conceived the annual New York City Center *Fall for Dance* Festival, which premiered in September 2004 and has sold out every year since, featuring multiple companies from various dance genres during the 10-day Festival, at \$10 per ticket. "I see a future for New York City Center that is as artistically rich as its past," says Shuler. "Every season we strive to bring more exceptional dance, music, and theater to the broadest possible audience, working to fulfill Mayor LaGuardia's dream of a true 'people's theater.'"