

JUDGE'S RULING CLEARS WAY TO REDEVELOP OPERA HOUSE

By Maureen Dezell, Globe Staff

Plans to revive the historic Opera House on Washington Street got the go-ahead yesterday when a Superior Court judge removed the last major legal obstacle to redevelopment of the long-shuttered landmark theater.

Clear Channel Entertainment plans to proceed apace with a \$30 million development project that would turn the 2,500-seat hall near Downtown Crossing into a major new performance center that would present extended runs of touring Broadway blockbusters such as "The Lion King" and "Hairspray" by as early as 2004.

"The glory days are coming back to Washington Street," Mayor Thomas M. Menino said yesterday, after a judge ruled in the city's favor in a protracted dispute that has pitted the city and Clear Channel against residents of condominium complexes adjacent to the Opera House.

Superior Court Judge Margot Botsford yesterday upheld the city's authority to allow expansion on Mason Street, which runs between the Opera House and Tremont on the Common, a condominium complex..

Residents of Tremont on the Common "are not opposed to the Opera House," said Elena Massarotti, chairwoman of the condominium's board of trustees. "We are opposed to the expansion of the Opera House onto Mason Street."

But without it, developers say, the theater simply cannot accommodate today's hit plays and mega musicals. Modeled on the Paris Opera House and designed by architect Thomas Lamb, the Opera House was built as a memorial to impresario B.F. Keith, who is considered the founder of the vaudeville circuit. Its facilities recall Keith and his era. The narrow stage, built to highlight the talents of seals and jugglers, is considered almost unusable by today's theater professionals. And while the backstage of the Opera House and the dressing rooms may have been appropriate for Pat and Mike acts, they barely meet modern union standards.

The theater has been shuttered since 1991, when Sarah Caldwell and her Opera Company of Boston were forced to close up shop because Caldwell was behind on mortgage payments and unable to pay utility or tax bills on the property. City officials considered the Opera House a

public safety hazard at the time.

Unlighted and unheated, the onetime performance palace languished until 1996, when the city threatened to seize it from Caldwell in lieu of payment for back taxes. Caldwell agreed to option the property to Theatre Management Group, a Houston-based concern that is now part of Clear Channel, in exchange for an assurance that she would be allowed to stage 12 weeks of opera performances each year at the Opera House. City authorities said yesterday that the agreement is still in place.

The Houston group's original designs called for the closing of Mason Street to accommodate an expanded stage and backstage. Neighbors objected vehemently to the proposal, saying it posed both a nuisance and safety hazard because delivery and firetrucks would not be able to drive down Mason Street to the back entrance of Tremont on the Common.

After TMG modified its design, the Boston Redevelopment Authority held public hearings on Opera House plans. According to BRA executive director Harry Collings, TMG, the BRA, and representatives of the condo associations spent hours at negotiating tables, attempting to forge an agreement that would satisfy all parties.

By the fall of 2000, the BRA was convinced that TMG had made "more than sufficient" design changes and provisions for such amenities as new sidewalks and lighting, said Collings. The authority was also fearful that the Opera House roof was so decrepit that it was in danger of collapsing that winter. The city seized a portion of Mason Street by eminent domain and, the following spring, gave TMG its approval to begin restoration of the theater.

In the summer of 2001, attorney Larry DiCara filed suit on behalf of the trustees of Tremont on the Common, challenging the city's right to take any piece of Mason Street for "private purposes." It is that challenge that Botsford ruled on yesterday. Massarotti said last night that she and the condominium's board had not had the opportunity to review the decision, but even the modified plan "does not allow the building to be served anywhere near the way it is served now, in terms of delivery, fire, safety, and trash removal."

The world's largest producer and presenter of live entertainment, Clear Channel has high hopes for the historic house, which Scott Zeiger, head of the company's theatrical division, predicts will be the "nicest theater in America" once it is refurbished. Menino, for his part, calls Botsford's ruling "a huge step forward" for preservation and the arts in Boston.

The Opera House development is one of four theater revitalization projects with which the city is involved. Construction is underway on a two-stage complex at the Boston Center for the Arts, Menino noted. And the city is pushing forward efforts to revive the Paramount and Modern theaters on lower Washington Street.

"Even at this very difficult time, when arts funding is being cut, we've got theaters going up," said the mayor.

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WHAT BOSTON CAN LEARN FROM THE BERKSHIRES

By Maureen Dezell, Globe Staff

BERKSHIRE COUNTY - It is high summer in the hills of Western Massachusetts, and Yo-Yo Ma is tying up traffic in Lenox on a Thursday evening. Cars crawl to Ma's concert at Tanglewood, and to Shakespeare & Company's sprawling new theater complex nearby.

Billboards on a snarled Route 7 tout the summer dance season at Jacob's Pillow, exhibitions at the Norman Rockwell Museum and Clark Art Institute, and the opening of the Porches Inn at Mass. MoCA.

A hip but homey hotel ensconced in a row of former crack houses in North Adams, the inn hopes to do brisk business in the long-depressed industrial town, which has drawn more than 250,000 visitors since the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art opened there two years ago.

Bostonians in great numbers don't spend that much time in the Berkshires, preferring to take in the sun, sea, and summer stock of Maine, New Hampshire, or the Cape. Connecticut and New York license plates dot the lots of gourmet stores busy before an outdoor Tanglewood concert; many of those watching the sun go down behind dancers rehearsing on an open-air stage at Jacob's Pillow could be extras in a Woody Allen film.

Nor is Boston's arts leadership inspired by what goes on to its west. But perhaps it should be. Known as a ski resort and destination for tourists in search of fall foliage and precious preserved New England towns, "there is literally no other place in the whole country that has the breadth and depth and

quality of world-class culture in a rural environment," says William R. Wilson Jr. of the Berkshire Visitors Bureau.

He may be paid to toot his region's horn, but the numbers bear Wilson out. The arts generate more than half of Berkshire County's annual \$250 million tourist trade. Tanglewood alone brings between \$60 and \$70 million to the area each year.

What Berkshire business and civic leaders have recognized for the last several years - and their Boston equivalents are only coming to understand - is how important the arts can be as a "cultural industry" and economic engine.

Among the reasons for their success: Institutions in the Berkshires collaborate with one another and with government agencies whose offices have a major impact on their livelihood.

At the visitors bureau's behest, the leaders of the dozen largest area arts institutions get together once a month over lunch to discuss strategy, expansion schemes, and programming dreams.

The group represents the region's oldest and nationally known arts organizations - Tanglewood, the Boston Symphony Orchestra's summer home; the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Becket; the Williamstown Theatre Festival; and the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown - as well as Mass. MoCA, the Berkshire Opera Company, and Shakespeare & Company, all of which have developed loyal followings.

It's not only big groups that benefit, either. Marketing and development representatives of 50 visual art, dance, theater, music, and historic organizations meet regularly with the visitor's bureau, whose staff answers the phone with a statement Wilson officially adopted four years ago:

"Welcome to the Berkshires, America's premiere cultural resort."

"We all see ourselves as members of a cultural industry - part of a cultural destination," says Ella Baff, executive director of Jacob's Pillow. "There's a lot of civic pride and strategy and cooperating that goes on around the fact that the Berkshires is a total venue as an aesthetic environment."

Close encounters

As they frolic in the towering white pines at Shakespeare & Company's Mainstage at the Mount, the fairies in "A Midsummer Night's Dream" are dancing to music never heard prior to this summer.

Tanglewood fellows Dan Cooper and Michael Gandolfi composed the incidental music for this "Dream," which is Shakespeare & Company's farewell production at Edith Wharton's turn-of-the-century estate in Lenox.

The musicians were among those who took part in a formal collaboration between Tanglewood and Shakespeare & Company last summer, writing and performing the score for "Coriolanus." The project worked so well, says artistic director Tina Packer, "we wanted them back."

"One of the great things about the Berkshires is the variety of disciplines," says BSO managing director Mark Volpe, sitting in a Tanglewood office that was once Aaron Copland's studio. Coupled with a sense that "we can all be greater than the sum of our parts," this has fostered a growing interest in collaboration among the arts, Volpe says.

The alliance last summer was the BSO's second with Shakespeare & Company, who have also performed with the Boston Pops. The training schools at Tanglewood and Jacob's Pillow this summer are collaborating on a composer-choreographers' laboratory, Close Encounters with Music.

Despite working frequently and closely together, "musicians and dancers and composers and choreographers do not generally know much about each other," says Baff.

Enabling young performing artists to work together is more than a goodwill gesture. "If our job is to prepare the next generation of musicians for the world, we have to deal with a world where distinctions and disciplines are much more blurred than they were," says Volpe.

"The job description of a musician is evolving. Not every kid is going to play orchestral music for a major symphony orchestra," he adds. "Some of them will write jingles." Others will compose for dance, theater, or movies.

No one is a more consummate and successful Hollywood crossover artist than Boston Pops laureate conductor and composer John Williams. When he chose to lead a cross-disciplinary workshop on writing music for film, he held the classes at Tanglewood.

Year-round efforts

"The Berkshires without Tanglewood is like Boston without the colleges and universities," contends Nancy Fitzpatrick, whose family owns the Red Lion Inn, an American icon since Norman Rockwell included it in his painting "Main Street, Stockbridge."

She is by no means a disinterested observer. The Fitzpatricks are BSO benefactors and long time supporters of Mass. MoCA; the Red Lion manages Porches. Tickets to Shakespeare & Company performances bear the Red Lion logo, the Berkshire Theatre Festival in Stockbridge performs on the Fitzpatrick Main Stage, and so on.

"My mother recognized early on that the arts are vital to the tourist economy," says Fitzpatrick.

But Tanglewood "is only here for 10 weeks in the summer," she says. Jacob's Pillow is likewise a warm-weather resident. The arts in the entire area have flourished in recent years since smaller, year-round companies have "taken root" in Berkshire County. Mass. MoCA, she adds, "has embraced collaboration from the beginning, and has opened people's eyes to what collaboration can do."

Originally conceived as a minimalist art Valhalla - an outpost in the mountains for massive works of contemporary visual art that can't be displayed most places - Mass. MoCA today prides itself on "blurring the lines between performing and visual art, art and technology, and production space or performance and exhibition space."

One of the museum's first collaborators was Jacob's Pillow, and the complex "wouldn't be here if it weren't for strong and profound partnerships with many institutions, a lot of which are in Berkshire County," says director Joseph Thompson.

Mass. MoCA's biggest booster, along with Thompson, is John Barrett III, mayor of North Adams since 1984. It was Barrett who first took Williams College art historians on a tour of the former Sprague electric factory that now houses the museum, Barrett who pressed local state representatives to pass a bond issue to fund the museum as an economic development engine, Barrett - and former state senator Jane Swift - who revived the project when it was dormant and deflated in the 1990s.

And it was Barrett who hung the multicolored Mass. MoCA banners - each brandishing the name of a corporate or civic sponsor - all over the city.

Things have paid off for the mayor. North Adams, a place that didn't have touch-tone telephone service until 1990, is today a tourist destination and

"silicon village," thanks to Mass. MoCA, which rents its commercial space to companies such as Kleiser-Walczak, the computer-animation outfit that did graphics for the movie "X-Men" and created the ninjas crawling through the walls in "Mortal Kombat Annihilation."

Though still half-built, Porches is expected to take some of the burden off the local Holiday Inn, which is routinely booked solid. The local branch of the chain hotel almost had to close its doors three times in the 1980s, notes the mayor. He loves his newly emerging city, even though some of the exhibitions he sees at Mass. MoCA, its economic engine, still "seem a little weird, a little silly."

Then again, even weird shows bring visitors. And they have to eat. Five restaurants have opened in North Adams this summer.

A worthy model

The Berkshire Opera Company is hoping to do for Great Barrington what Mass. MoCA has done for North Adams.

After 16 years wandering from theater to theater in the hills of Western Massachusetts, the opera company has embarked on a \$10 million renovation of the Mahaiwie Theatre in Great Barrington. Hugh Hardy, the award-winning New York architect and theater restorer - who happens to have a home in the Berkshires and great affection for the Mahaiwie - is redesigning the historic vaudeville house-turned-movie theater.

The company plans to present opera during the summer, as well as film festivals, concerts, and community events in the fall, winter, and spring. Crossing disciplines and collaboration will be key to the effort, says Berkshire Opera president and CEO Sanford Fisher.

Once the Mahaiwie, Shakespeare & Company, and Mass. MoCA's dance and music programs are up and running 12 months a year,

Berkshire County, which is "already a year-round resort for museums, should become a year-round destination for the performing arts" as well, says Fisher.

Boston arts groups - and not just the BSO - may find themselves invited west.

"My dream," Fisher says, "is to involve the Boston arts community - to see organizations that perform in the winter in Boston perform in the Berkshires."

"Sometimes," he adds, "it seems as if Massachusetts is two sta

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MFA SET FOR A TRANSFORMATION ADDITIONS START WITH 3-STORY WING

By Maureen Dezell, Globe Staff

A three-story wing for the display of American and contemporary art will be the first addition to a dramatically transformed Museum of Fine Arts, officials announced yesterday in unveiling the 132-year-old institution's long-awaited new master plan.

Sheathing large parts of the museum in glass and creating two spacious inner courtyards, the plan will turn an institution that was built as an elite Brahmin preserve into a public gathering place as well as a showcase for art. It ultimately will double the size of the MFA.

"What we have is a vision of the museum that is both intensely practical and transformatory," said MFA director Malcolm Rogers. "Above all, it sends out the message that we want to bring people into contact with great art in spectacular settings."

The first phase of the MFA's master plan will include the construction of a new east wing for American and contemporary art. To build the facility, which will include an auditorium and a restaurant, the museum will demolish its existing east wing, which is used largely for office and storage space.

Rogers said he didn't expect the museum to close during construction, which he hoped would begin in 2003. With the new east wing, space for the museum to show its 350-million object collection will grow by 27 percent.

The east wing is the beginning of a far more dramatic rethinking of the museum. The full plan - which includes the construction of a glazed crystal spine extending the length of the museum from east to west, a new west wing, and a study center - will double the MFA's space when it is completed.

The museum has announced a \$425 million fund-raising for the first phase of the project. Rogers yesterday declined to say whether the museum had received major gifts to get the work started, but he expressed confidence that the effort was on track.

Award-winning architect Norman Foster spent more than two years developing a comprehensive plan for the MFA. He and his renowned London design firm have produced an understated and intricate scheme that calls for a "return to the roots and strengths" of Guy Lowell's original neoclassical design while at the same time building bold new structures that will invite the public to the museum and enhance their experience once they get there.

Rather than designing a signature architectural feature such as an arch or a dome that would identify the MFA, Foster intends to "create a dialogue between old and new," bolstering and burnishing the museum's "central axis," which extends from its south-facing Huntington Avenue doors, to its northern entrance on the Fenway.

The master plan will unfold in stages. The first phase will include refurbished European art galleries and enlarged conservation, educational, and

research facilities. But its showiest element will be the new east wing, including a new visitor's center and a glassed-over Fraser Garden Court, which Foster described as a "jewel box."

The northeast interior of the museum will be visible from the from outside the museum, from Forsyth Way and the Fenway. Here, too, will be a new restaurant that overlooks the Boston skyline.

Eventually, the museum plans to enclose a second courtyard, creating two public spaces that will open onto all galleries, allowing visitors to navigate the now-confusing building more clearly.

"Making the walls of a museum transparent is far more dramatic than building a logo or a pyramid," said MFA director Rogers. "It is the most radical thing we're doing. Art will be visible. We want to educate people. When we open the Fenway entrance, we're going to become more of a neighborhood museum."

Rogers sees the new MFA as "a landmark building for the city of Boston that makes a strong statement about the value of contemporary art, and builds bridges to our surrounding community and audiences that have not been served."

Putting the art of the Americas collection on display in the bright, airy new wing is a move calculated to underscore the MFA's connection to the city of Boston, "the cradle of civilization," said Rogers, and to address "the face of contemporary America." State of the art galleries will allow curators to display large-scale contemporary paintings and sculpture, and to pull treasures such as the Thomas Sully's "Washington Crossing the Delaware" and paintings by John Singer Sargent out of storage.

"There will also be more rotating space for works of art on paper, prints, and drawings," said Rogers.

Broadening the MFA's mission and public constituency has been Rogers's hallmark in his seven years as director of the museum. That is a major - and at times controversial - break with tradition.

"There's a slightly clubby feeling" to the original MFA designed by Lowell, noted Foster partner Spencer de Grey. "It isn't a particularly inviting building."

Form follows function. The MFA, like most cultural institutions established in Victorian-era Boston, was a club for Proper Bostonians. When the museum was founded in 1876 in Copley Square, it was a public institution and received some support from the city. After the move to Huntington Ave., museum trustees decided to decline the offer of public money, in part because it came with a caveat: that the public (Irish, Italian, and Jewish immigrants) be allowed in the doors.

The scions of its founding families dominated the MFA governing board for the first two-thirds of the 20th century. Few were munificent in their support of the institution, and it fell into decline. By the 1970s, locked doors, dimly lit galleries, and indifferent visitor services were the norm at the encyclopedic museum, which houses the second-largest art collection in the Western Hemisphere.

The MFA closed itself off from the community that surrounds it, shuttering its Fenway entrance in 1975, and, in 1990, going so far as to close its Huntington Ave. doors, symbolically sealing itself off from Roxbury and Mission Hill neighborhoods to its south.

One of Rogers's first moves after he became director in the fall of 1995 was to reopen the Huntington doors.

Since then, the museum director has extended MFA hours from 55 to 64 hours

per week. He instituted a policy of free admission for students under 17 and free open houses three times each year.

The numbers of visitors and members at the MFA have increased significantly in the past five years. Giving to the museum has gone up so much that trustees have launched a capital campaign that is by far the most ambitious undertaken by a Boston cultural organization, and the largest museum fund-raising drive outside New York.

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PLANS RESURFACE FOR PARAMOUNT FACE LIFT DILAPIDATED THEATER WOULD BE ARTS CENTER

By Maureen Dezell, Globe Staff

Promising to breathe new life into Downtown Crossing and Boston's arts scene, Mayor Thomas M. Menino yesterday announced preliminary plans to turn the Paramount Theatre - a once-grand Art Deco movie palace shuttered since 1976 - into a showcase for drama, music, and dance.

The city of Boston, the American Repertory Theatre, and Millennium Partners-Boston will work with prominent architect Graham Gund to develop a proposal for a 400- to 500-seat theater on what is now a seedy stretch of Washington Street between Downtown Crossing and the Combat Zone. The dilapidated Paramount would be transformed into a state-of-the-art performance center, serving as a second stage for the ART and as a venue for small and mid-sized arts organizations, Menino said.

Early estimates have put a price tag of \$15 million on the renovation alone, said ART managing director Robert J. Orchard.

The Boston Conservatory of Music, World Music, the Fleet/ Boston Celebrity Series, Shakespeare & Company, and the Handel & Haydn Society have expressed interest in the theater, which, Orchard said, would probably function "somewhat like a time share," with the ART occupying the building for "two-to-three-week segments for about three months each year," and other organizations staging work "as they need it."

Neither Orchard nor the mayor would speculate on how much money would be needed to operate the theater once it was renovated. Orchard emphasized that designs for the project are still in the exploratory stages.

Boston is notoriously short of performance halls. Small and mid-sized arts groups routinely struggle to find suitable stages on which to perform. More established organizations, such as the Cambridge-based ART, have difficulty finding houses that are suitable for developing work by emerging artists that keep their organizations vital.

Despite Menino's promise, representatives of performing arts organizations, historic preservation groups, and neighborhood businesses who gathered yesterday under a tent across from the Paramount greeted the announcement with cautious enthusiasm.

With reason: Plans to revive the Paramount have flourished and fizzled before, most recently in the late 1980s, when the Boston Redevelopment Authority

designated the neighborhood that surrounds it the Midtown Cultural District. Efforts to renovate nearby landmark theaters, notably the Opera House, have foundered.

"Building partnerships in Boston is not easy," noted Orchard.

City officials close to the effort said the involvement of Orchard and the ART, along with the mayor's personal interest in the Paramount and the Opera House, could propel this project forward.

An arts administrator of national repute, Orchard cofounded the ART with Robert Brustein at Harvard University's Loeb Drama Center in 1980. The troupe's elaborate, sometimes radical interpretations of classics have drawn critical acclaim and audience interest from across the country. But the ART shares its main stage with Harvard undergraduates, who perform at the Loeb several weeks each year.

What to do with the blighted Downtown Crossing theaters has been a long-running drama involving the city, arts leaders, and neighborhood groups.

Menino, who has taken an interest in historic preservation, nominated the Paramount, the Opera House, and the Modern Theatre on Washington Street for the National Trust for Historic Preservation's list of Endangered Places in 1995. All three made the cut in 1995, and the mayor has been involved in efforts to restore the buildings since.

In 1996, the Texas-based Theatre Management Group, which has since been purchased by entertainment-industry giant Clear Channel Communications, acquired an option to buy the 2,400-seat Opera House from Opera Company of Boston founder Sarah Caldwell. Plans to refurbish the building, a beaux-arts performance palace, drew protests from residents of abutting and nearby condominium complexes.

The BRA has worked continually with Theatre Management Group to revise the plans and address residents' concerns. But neighbors and their attorneys have objected to every revision and modification the company has presented since, most recently challenging the BRA's preliminary approval of the project in court.

Eager to book a show like "The Lion King" or "The Producers" into the theater as soon as possible, Clear Channel has reportedly grown impatient with the flagging project.

The city has attempted to put it on a legal fast track, according to BRA officials.

If that doesn't expedite progress, Menino told the Globe, "I'm going to bring everyone involved to the table within the next two weeks. The Opera House has got to get done." SIDEBAR: PARAMOUNT EFFORTS PLEASE REFER TO MICROFILM FOR CHART DATA