

Curtain down on a quarter century

By Arlene Gross

June 25, 2009 | 12:37 PM



Citing conflict with the landlord, owners of the Inter-Media Arts Center vacated its New York Avenue venue last week, much to the chagrin of live music fans all over Long Island. Photo by Arlene Gross

After 36 years of bringing live performances to Long Island — the last 26 in a vintage theater on New York Avenue in the heart of Huntington village — the founders of the Inter-Media Arts Center, known to all as IMAC, closed their doors.

"In many ways it was sort of the writing on the wall," said Michael Rothbard, who founded the beloved arts center with his long-term life partner, Kathie Bodily. "I guess we just wanted to, if we had to end this,

[go out] at the top of our game, rather than run it into the ground."

For its 30,000 annual patrons, the curtain closing on a virtual "who's who" of blues and jazz also means canceling this year's scheduled shows at the venue, including The Folk Music Society of Huntington showcase of composers and performers; Spyro Gyra; Peter White; Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, and Jonathan Butler & Norman Brown.

Long-standing IMAC members Carl and Karen Grill of Melville are sad to see the performance center go.

"I don't know of any other place that was like it," said Carl, 60. "In a way it was very much like Greenwich Village used to be in the 60s. ... It was part of what made Huntington kind of a special place to live. ... I look around and don't see any other venue like this. We're going to miss the place and I hope they're successful in finding some place else."

Still, Rothbard and Bodily, who live in Huntington, are looking at the theater's closing as a chance to reinvent both IMAC and themselves. The dynamic duo have three plans in the works.

First, they want to bring together audiences and venues through an interactive cultural calendar for hotels, cable and satellite television, Internet, and phones, which will feature interviews, listings and performance clips.

"The difference is we want to use interactivity so that a person can find an event, learn about it, learn about the venue and immediately purchase a ticket. ..." Rothbard said.

Second, after three-and-a-half decades of booking bands to their own concert venue, Rothbard and Bodily will avail themselves — on a consulting basis — to anyone around the country who is interested in starting their own musical theaters.

Lastly, they will work with the town to explore how to bring music and art in an IMAC-style setting back to Huntington. Rothbard recently met with Supervisor Frank Petrone to discuss various options and came away with the impression that the supervisor was very eager to work with him.

"I was very surprised that he responded that way," Rothbard said.

"IMAC's quarter-century here exemplifies how Huntington embraces the arts, and we look forward to working with IMAC to bring a new, world-class performing arts center to Long Island's arts capital," Petrone stated. "Immediately after meeting with IMAC, I directed the town's cultural affairs director to put together an exploratory study group, including representatives from arts groups, to assess options. I expect that group will begin meeting shortly."

If they get anything off the ground, it would be more than a performing arts center, Rothbard said. "It'll be a center for the arts. We'll be serving simultaneously a number of artistic activities seven days a week and into the night."

While he would like to continue in the same venue, the 370 New York Ave. building needs significant repair, Rothbard said. "That's one of the reasons we're leaving."

"The final coup de grace was a 60-pound piece of plaster that could have killed our back stage manager had she been sitting in the seat when the thing came down."

Rothbard said he has a thick folder filled with requests to his landlord for repairs. "There are a lot of landlords who have a notion that they buy a building," he said, "and they'll just squeeze the juice out of it and not put one little drop back."

From the moment their new landlord took over six years ago, theirs was a contentious relationship, said Rothbard, who claims that landlord Frank Viteritti suggested replacing the lobby entrance with a storefront and permitted his adjacent restaurant tenant, Danu, to

have live music that could be heard upstairs at IMAC. This eventually drove many musical artists away, Rothbard claims.

"If he had put a 500-pound millstone around our neck and threw us in the ocean, he would have been doing the same thing he did to our organization," Rothbard said.

The landlord refuted many of Rothbard's claims, countering that Rothbard hasn't paid rent for May or June and terminated the lease in violation of his contract, which required six months advance notice of their departure.

Viteritti also claims the building is well-kept and in no dire need of repair. "IMAC has also failed to advise you that it did not comply with the terms and provision of the lease which requires him to make all repairs for his portion of the building, except the roof." He said he hopes to rent out the space to another theater tenant.

In the meantime, area concert fans are distressed about the recent void, stated John Platt, disc jockey of WFUV-Radio and president of the Huntington Arts Council's board.

"It reminds me how I felt about the Bottom Line's closing back in 2004," he stated in an email. "So many special memories ... Bromberg, Joan Armatrading, Keb Mo, Phoebe Snow, Jonatha Brooke, etc. I'll never forget tangoing across the back of the stage with Jonatha while Michael Rothbard was making announcements. Talk about being upstaged! The room always had good sound, good sight lines and a great vibe. And Michael, who loved the music, was always the mensch. ... Doors close, let's hope doors will open, too."

Despite the disappointment engendered by their decision, Rothbard displayed a sunny optimism for the future. "We're going to be so expansive, because the stress and the pressure on us will be so much more alleviated," he said. "Goodness knows how we're going to start flying in so many ways."

Copyright 2009