

Unification Church Purchases Manhattan Center for more than two million dollars

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On October 5, the World Mission Center of the Unification Church expanded to include the Manhattan Center, to be used for cultural and evangelical events. The 3,000-seat auditorium, adjacent to the World Mission Center on 34th St., was purchased for more than two million dollars from the Ballet Theater Corporation.

The building has a unique personality. As the pet project of Oscar Hammerstein, the Manhattan Opera House was, at its creation in 1906, a beautiful first-rate opera house having the best acoustics of any hall in the city. After its short glory, it was drastically altered by an eccentric theatrical producer and ultimately degraded as a sports arena and site of tumultuous rallies, including Communist gatherings.

The Manhattan Opera House was built by Hammerstein with his personal funds to house his own Manhattan Opera Company, a competitor with the Metropolitan. The interior was done in ornate Louis the Fourteenth style. The enormous stage was flanked by five levels of box seats and was clearly visible from any seat in the orchestra and the three steeply inclined balconies.

But Mr. Hammerstein could sustain his dream only until 1919. For about ten years the Manhattan Opera

House was used by touring companies, especially the Chicago Lyric Opera. In the late 1920s the Scottish Rite division of the Masonic Order bought the House for its functions. Due to the Depression, it was forced to lease the House to Max Rhinehardt, producer of the play "The Eternal Road."



Rhinehardt blocked off the third balcony, covered over the ceiling, cut the stage in half, and enclosed the boxes, covering them with "socialist realism" style murals.

It was downhill from there for the Manhattan Opera House. After the collapse of the play, the House became the Manhattan Center, scene of wrestling and boxing matches, rock concerts, conventions, dances, union meetings and political rallies. It is reported that Jane Fonda once spoke there. At some point in its changing history, its gently sloping floor was leveled, its orchestra seating removed, and its walls painted a garish red and turquoise.

The American Ballet Theatre, a company lacking a permanent home, was most recently interested in the Manhattan Center New Yorker complex. However, it was unable to raise the ten million dollars it deemed necessary for the purchase and renovation of the Center. In light of Reverend Moon's desire to establish the finest of cultural centers in New York, it is interesting to read the opinion of Oliver Smith, speaking for the American Ballet Theatre's acquisition of the Center and the New Yorker: "Such an improvement (the creation of a performing arts complex) in mid-Manhattan

would be an oasis which would improve the area in both aesthetic and economic terms.... What better way to celebrate our bicentennial than to build a great new theatre which will celebrate the creativity of our citizens?"

The Manhattan Center is enormous. Nine stories of lounges, lobbies and offices rise up on the street side of the theater. Above the theater is a large banquet hall, reportedly a favorite recording studio of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. After the building was purchased, the 200 members of Performing Arts Department set out to clean the whole building and sand the stage floor. Repainting the theater is the next order of business. As the building is restored, it will serve a variety of purposes for the Church and other groups. It is currently in great demand as a meeting hall, reflecting its potential as a social and cultural center.