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BY ANNE MCCARTHY STRAUSS ♦ PHOTOS BY LEZ GLASGOW

# Staging a Comeback

A Long Island house returns to its show-biz heyday.



New siding, roof shingles, and 37 windows were merely the exterior repairs made under the tight three-month deadline.



Weeds, graffiti, and decay led to a bargain price, leaving funds for restoration.

For its first four decades, the house in St. James, New York, resounded with music, dancing, and drama. Thomas Garrick, a vaudevillian and Broadway actor, had built it at the turn of the last century as a getaway. In summer, stars of the day practiced their craft on three stages, two built into the structure and another outdoors.

During his ownership through the '20s, St. James attracted such show business greats as John, Lionel, and Ethel Barrymore, the Bartons, the Colliers, and the LaRacs. Some boarded with Garrick, while others







had built homes of their own in what was becoming an actor's haven. Eventually, Garrick sold the house to Cynthia Meade, a retired silent film actress who carried on the tradition in her own style.

The music stopped suddenly in 1945. When Meade learned that her son had been killed in World War II, she reacted by smashing every piece of china in her kitchen. Ultimately overcome by heartache, she abandoned the home, leaving it vacant for nearly two decades.

In the 1970s it was purchased by an eccentric mortician and her equally



Above: The indoor stage off the dining room offers guests plush sofas where they can enjoy dessert and conversation. Left: Michele D'Amour and Steven Podd use the outdoor stage to relax and entertain.



macabre husband who decorated it with props and furnishings from the funeral parlor. The grounds were left untended and became a hangout for local youngsters who offered their own touches, such as a tombstone stolen from a nearby cemetery.

By 1999 the mortician had died, and her husband was forced to put the house up for sale. Steven Podd and his wife Michelle D'Amour were encouraged by their 13-year-old daughter Lindsay to visit the house with the listing agent. "It was curiosity that drove us there at first," recalls Steve.

Steve immediately saw potential, but Michelle insisted there was no way she would consider it. By then a dilapidated shell, it was spattered with graffiti, and the property strewn with abandoned cars.

But when Steve's cash offer for far less than the asking price was accepted, Michelle reconsidered, since money for



The outdoor stage was a prime reason for the one-acre site being registered with the New York State Historical Society.



An original white stucco fountain was unreparable and so heavy it had to be buried where it stood. The original garden design was replicated with a new fountain and benches.



Former actress/owner Cynthia Meade created a stone sculpture embedded with china she broke in anguish after learning that her son was killed in World War II.

Above: Podd and D'Amour opened the original downstairs floor plan by removing some French doors and widening a hallway, but they made the dining room smaller by 8' because it seemed too cavernous for intimate dining. Opposite: In the upstairs bath, the tub got three reglezings and a 1910 stained-glass window was repaired.





restoration was now available. Under her stipulations that the work would take no more than three months and the family would remain in their current home during that period, she agreed to the purchase. Out of respect for the home's history and their own love of the theater, they decided to incorporate each of the three original stages into their living space.

To get this extraordinarily tight-deadlined project moving, Steve contacted Brian Capo, a local architect, and his partner, Phil DeBlasio, a contractor. Both had grown up in St. James and observed the property as nature took it over.

They began by clearing a mountain of ivy and other invasive plants from the outdoor stage. After a thorough power washing, Michelle transformed it with new landscaping and bistro tables.

Meanwhile, Capo developed architectural plans to stabilize the sagging structure and to incorporate the two indoor stages, which had been created by enclosing a front porch. He transformed the stage off the living room into a musical venue where Lindsay could practice piano and violin. The second indoor stage, with its mahogany balustrade, became a seating area off the dining room.

Because Garrick and Meade had used the home as a rooming house for actor friends, there were six small bedrooms

upstairs, which the contractors converted into three large bedrooms. The downstairs was already open, although the couple enhanced this by removing some French doors and widening the hall. Wherever possible, they retained what they could, restoring original doors and their crystal doorknobs. "The built-in shelving in the dining room is original," notes Michelle, "and all the wood floors are original. Where flooring wasn't salvageable, we replaced it with ceramic tile."

Subcontractors replaced roof shingles, and 37 double-hung windows, resided, and updated electricity and plumbing. "Phil and Brian were terrific," Steve says. "Because we had given them such a short period of time in which to complete the restoration, they hired full teams for each project, completing each undertaking in a matter of days. We moved in three months after hiring them, and all that remained to be done was a bit of painting."

The return of music and laughter to the refurbished stages was launched with a party that Steve and Michelle held in March 2000 for 200 neighbors, friends, and contractors when they moved in. Lindsay and her music instructor were joined by additional musicians and singers to entertain from the music stage. Guests flowed easily through the downstairs rooms, spilling out on to the one-acre property—large by Long Island standards. "It's a great house for entertaining," says Michelle.

Other galas have followed. Steve and Michelle, who are both school principals, host an annual Christmas party for the staff of the school where Michelle works. "Everyone seems to prefer a party at our home to going out to a restaurant," Steve says. "We always include musical entertainment from the stage as part of the event."

"We know that the actors who summertime here years ago put on performances for small groups of friends," he adds. "Although we may not perform, we do love to entertain. We're happy to be a part of the tradition." ■

*Anne McCarthy Strauss, who lives in Long Island, New York, specializes in writing about home, food, and other lifestyle topics.*

