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Athens In The Wilderness

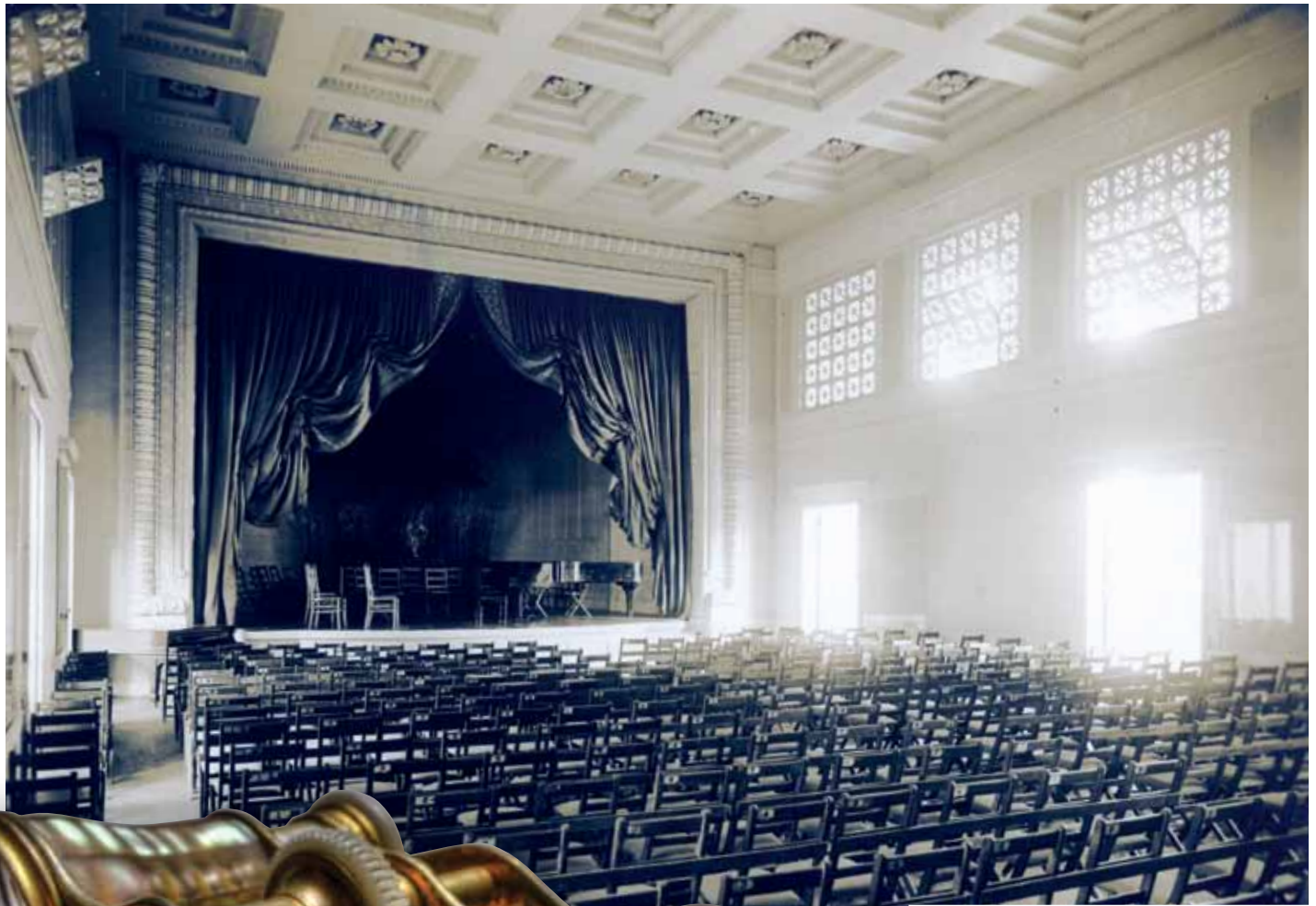
Before Tanglewood, Bar Harbor's artsy set dared to dream big. BY BRAD EMERSON

By 1888, when the Kebo Valley Golf Club—then only the eighth golf club in America—was founded, Bar Harbor had become an international destination. The clubhouse was a new social center away from the hotels, where the cottagers often found themselves mixing, to their distaste, with the hoi polloi. In addition to golf and tennis, the clubhouse's sweeping lawns and elegant verandas provided a place for Society to promenade in the afternoon, and a theater provided a spot for performances and balls.

In 1899, the clubhouse burned. A new one was built, but without a theater. By 1905, this absence was felt, and a few leaders of the summer community decided to build for the Arts a facility as fine as those already provided for the Amusements (Yachting, Drinking, Golf, and Tennis). A site was chosen at the edge of the Kebo's putting green, which would double as an outdoor amphitheater.



When luminaries of the arts came to Bar Harbor: Ballet legend Vaslav Nijinski, shown here as Pan in his *très risqué* *Rite of Spring* costume. At right, pianist Vladimir Horowitz.



Five members of the summer colony financed the project: Mrs. Henry Dimock; George W. Vanderbilt; George B. Dorr, who would later found Acadia National Park; Henry Lane Eno, whose forebears built New York's original Fifth Avenue Hotel; and Mrs. Robert Abbe. For the design, the group commissioned Guy Lowell, architect of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The original theatre at Kebo Valley had been in the Shingle Style, but taste had changed, and it was decided that a Greek temple under the pine trees would provide the most appropriate setting for the arts.

Unlike the ancient structures that inspired it, this temple was not built of marble, but stucco, "finished to represent Parian marble." According to *The New York Times*, the red Venetian tile roof was supported by "the largest wooden columns ever turned in Maine." Copies of the Parthenon friezes were imported from Paris and mounted on the facade. Inside, the walls and ceiling of the stage and proscenium adapted principles of sounding boards in the great German concert halls, and natural lighting was provided "from the top after the manner of the ancient Greek shrines.



Minimalist New England seating meets classical magnificence in the performance hall; Polish composer, pianist, and nationalist Ignacy Jan Paderewski (above) was among the international stars who came Bar Harbor.

The proscenium's curtain was of elaborately embroidered gold English damask specially woven for the building, the joint gift of George Vanderbilt and Mrs. John Inness Kane, whose late husband was the great-grandson of John Jacob Astor. The new Bar Harbor "Temple for the Arts" attracted national attention, with arti-

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cles in *The Architectural Review* as well as *Century Magazine* and *The New York Times*.

The opening concert on June 13, 1907, featuring the great soprano Emma Eames was followed over the years by many more of the world's musical greats, perhaps more than any other hall in Maine except Portland's City Hall. Among those who came were violinists Kreisler, Zimbalist, and Kneisel; singers Alma Gluck and Roger de Bruyn; pianists Paderewski, Schelling, Horowitz, and Iturbe; conductors Damrosch and Stokowski, and even monologists Ruth Draper and Cornelia Otis Skinner. In addition to music, the building hosted 'serious' lectures and art exhibits, and presented theatrical troupes including the Washington Square Players, The Theatre Workshop, and the local Surry Players, whose numbers included a young actor named Henry Fonda.

Society has always loved dress-up, and in the early years many amateur tableaux were performed there, including a 1909 Greek pageant arranged by Mrs. Albert Clifford Barney, mother of the *saloniste* Natalie Barney. One hundred and fifty prominent members of the summer colony danced about the grounds dressed in diaphanous garb as nymphs and shepherdesses (it was the age of Isadora Duncan) to interpret the tale of the love of Egeria for the mortal Strephon.

Another tableau featured socialites recreating favorite portraits. Mrs. John Jacob Astor IV was a Reynolds beauty in picture hat, a Miss Maull balanced Mrs. Astor as a Gains-



borough portrait, Miss Mary Canfield and John J. Emery Jr. portrayed a Watteau shepherd and shepherdess. Mrs. Ernest Schelling enacted a Polish farm scene with costumes she'd brought from Poland, and family-proud Albert Eugene Gallatin posed as his own grandfather's portrait by Gilbert Stuart.

Before Tanglewood, the Boston Symphony lay idle in the summer, and so a number of the musicians, as the Boston Symphony Players, were engaged to accompany the morning swim at the Swimming Club and to play at parties in the evening. The Symphony Players franchise received serious competition within a few years when a young bandleader named Meyer Davis broke onto the Bar Harbor scene; his eventually became the orchestra of choice from Bar Harbor to Palm Beach.

Performers and patrons, clockwise from top left: Poet, playwright, and novelist Natalie Barney, painted by her mother, Alice Pike, a.k.a. A-lister Mrs. Albert Clifford Barney; a vintage postcard captures President William Howard Taft golfing on the grounds of the arts temple he was never tempted to enter; virtuoso conductor Leopold Stokowski; a young and almost-famous Henry Fonda.



In 1916, Davis was playing at evening dances at the fashionable Malvern Hotel. Mrs. Davis remembered watching the orchestra through a glass door behind the ballroom stage one evening and seeing a compact man, dapper in a gray suit, enter the back of the room. Rather than take a seat as she expected, the man, unseen by the audience, suddenly broke into a little

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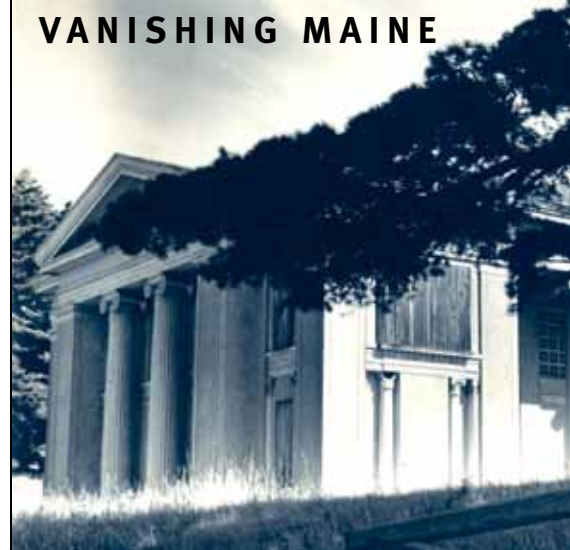
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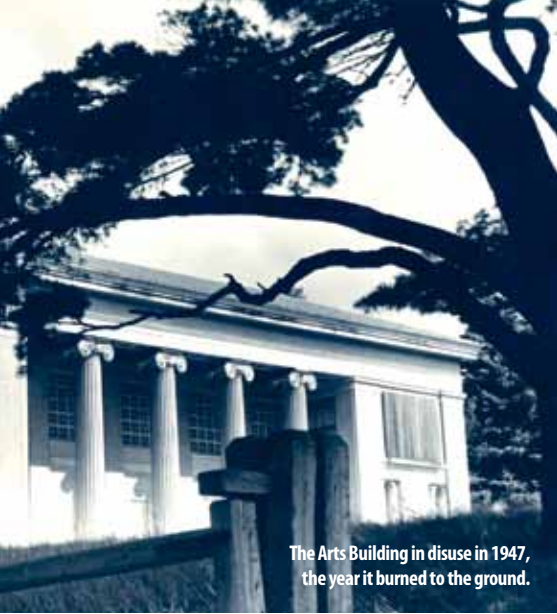
Athens in the Wilderness (continued from page 40)

gavotte. Enchanted, Mrs. Davis made inquiries, and to her astonishment, discovered her mysterious stranger was the great dancer Vaslav Nijinsky.

During World War I, unable to go to Europe, Sergei Diaghilev sent Nijinsky to spend the summer at Bar Harbor, hoping the fresh air and isolation would inspire the dancer to complete his new ballet, *Till Eulenspiegel*.

Other than his gavotte at the Malvern, no record survives of a public performance by Nijinsky in Bar Harbor. The Building of Arts was his rehearsal space, and there the ballet was prepared for its opening in New York. Nijinsky was joined by the set and costume designer Robert Edmond Jones, who later remembered that "invitations to the great houses of Bar Harbor showered upon me like gold" from hostesses hoping that he could induce the great dancer to accompany him, but Nijinsky rarely went out, rehearsing by day and working on the designs by evening. *Till Eulenspiegel* opened in New York that winter. The ballet choreographed at the Building of Arts, remembered by Jones as "that beautiful temple overlooking the sea," was Nijinsky's last.

During the Great Depression, the Building of Arts soldiered on. New donors and backers were found, impresario Timothee Adamowski continued to book first-string performers, but the clock was running out, and of course, it was never entirely about the art. When the Surry Players performed Aristophanes' *The Birds* in the putting green/amphitheatre in July of 1935, the review in the next day's *New York Times* was far more concerned with the audience—Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr., Mrs. Reginald De Koven, Mrs. J. West Roosevelt, writer Mary Rob-



The Arts Building in disuse in 1947, the year it burned to the ground.

erts Rinehart, Mrs. Gerrish Milliken, and Edith Vanderbilt Fabbri—than with the performance. Notably absent from the audience were husbands, either back at their offices in New York, or on their yachts, or perhaps even on the golf course next to the amphitheatre.

A 1941 exhibit was held for benefit of the American British Art Center's war efforts. Cecil Beaton's then unpublished series "London's Honourable Scars," recent London war posters and 25 sketches by J.M.W. Turner, were shown. By the next season, wartime gas rationing had made travel to remote Bar Harbor difficult, and the resort was a virtual ghost town, with many cottages shuttered that season.

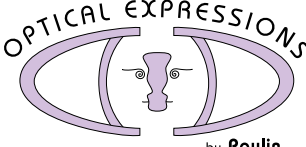
John D. Rockefeller Jr. was among those who had quietly made up the Building of Arts' deficit for years. By 1941, the Building could no longer pay its taxes, and the town of Bar Harbor was about to foreclose on its liens. Rockefeller purchased the building for \$500, hoping to secure its future as a center for culture. In 1944, he found that adequate support was not forthcoming, and the building was sold to Consuella de Sides, a follower of Indian spiritual master and self-proclaimed 'Avatar' Meher Baba. She intended to make it again a center of performance, but fate had other plans. In October 1947, Bar Harbor was swept by a devastating forest fire. The Building of Arts lay directly in its path, and the make-believe temple of plaster and wood was destroyed.

Kebo Valley Club itself survives. The famous 17th 'Elbow Hole,' where President Taft carded 27 in 1910 remains. In the grove behind, the steps to the Building of Arts remain, leading nowhere. ■

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