

TOP STORIES IN NEW YORK

1 of 9



Thunderbolt to Hit Coney Island This Se...

2 of 9



Mayor de Blasio Chided for Missing Stab...

3 of 9



WTC Arts Center Snagged



Willets Poin Shops Ink Deal

CULTURE CITY

Brighter Lights for Town Hall

By PIA CATTON

CONNECT



Email

Print

Save

0 Comments

Updated March 25, 2013 10:57 a.m. ET

As Times Square theaters go, the Town Hall is a bit of a wallflower.

It sits on West 43rd Street, closer to Sixth Avenue than Broadway, aloof from the mayhem. No flashing neon mars its elegant (and landmarked) façade. No Broadway show has made its modest marquee the talk of the town.



Michael Presser, the new president and CEO of the Town Hall, in the building's 1,495-seat theater. *Adrian Fussell for The Wall Street Journal*

What this 1921 McKim, Mead & White building does have, however, is history: speakers from Eleanor Roosevelt to Garrison Keillor, performances by Richard Strauss to Ladysmith Black Mambazo. Now, the venue's new leadership is leveraging that past for a redesigned future. Last month, Town Hall announced that longtime board member Michael Presser would take over as its new president and CEO, succeeding Marvin Leffler, who stepped down after more than

30 years of leadership.

As a symbolic gesture to the public, the venue is marking the changeover with a free concert on Thursday that will include acts from Broadway shows ("Chicago," "Avenue Q," "Phantom"), plus the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, the Town Hall Broadway's Rising Stars Chorus, and others. Tickets are free at the box office as of Monday at noon.

The evening's title, "Spotlight on Town Hall," indicates Mr. Presser's intention to return the 1,495-seat room to a starring role. "From its very beginnings, this has been the meeting place of the city, a place for public debate and entertainment," he said.

Built 93 years ago by a group of suffragists, the venue was designed as a speakers' hall in an era before microphones were standard. "It's in the family of theaters like Carnegie Hall and City Center," said architectural historian Barry Lewis. "These were theaters that were built to spread the word of democracy. The layout of the seating there is such that there is no obstructed view, and the acoustics are wonderful."

Major issues of the day were addressed: Margaret Sanger was arrested there for advocating birth control on Nov. 13, 1921. Later, it was home to the radio series "America's Town Meetings of the Air," which assembled four speakers for a public discussion. Its stage was also home to ground-breaking performances: Opera singer Marian Anderson made her New York debut there in 1935. Whitney Houston did the same at age 14 four decades later.

If the Town Hall's prominence has faded in the years since, there is at least a silver lining in its story: It's still standing.

You have a passion for your business.

We have a passion for protecting it.

See how our business insurance can help protect what matters.

Learn More



PROUD PARTNER

Popular Now

What's This?

ARTICLES

1

Sandberg and Chávez: Don't Call These Girls Bossy



2

Search for Missing Plane Proves Fruitless



3

Opinion: Ronald Rubin: When 'Disparate Impact' Bites Back



4

Opinion: The UAW Demands a Mulligan



5

Opinion: Jim Thomas: How to Put Military Pressure on Russia



VIDEO

A Timeline of Flight

That could just as easily not be the case. After assuming control of the building in 1958, New York University was faced with a problem by the late '70s. "They didn't want to abandon the building that they had owned for about 20 years, but they felt they couldn't afford to keep it going," said Mr. Leffler, Town Hall's president emeritus. At the time he was a member of the NYU Club, an independent organization that leased the space above the theater. "It was not landmarked then. We became concerned because we had the club upstairs. What was going to happen to the club?"

In 1978, Mr. Leffler formed an organization that took over the management of the historic venue, thus avoiding a sale that might have allowed a new owner to raze it. "We thought we would do it for a couple of years," he said. "Ignorance is a wonderful thing. I didn't know how hard it would be."

Even as Times Square and the Theater District recovered, the Town Hall could not simply hop on the Broadway bandwagon: It was designed as a hall for speakers, meaning it has almost no wing space and cannot accommodate sets and scenery. While major performers have given concerts there—Woody Allen, Joshua Bell, Nora Jones, Rufus Wainwright—the hall is rarely booked for the kinds of extended engagements that can make a venue famous.

Changing that is now in the hands of Mr. Presser, who is also the founder of Inside Broadway, which brings theater programs to city schools. "Marvin [Leffler] is due an enormous amount of credit for saving this building," he said. "We stabilized, and we grew. But we are now in a different era with different challenges."

Among his first steps was reinserting the theater into the political mix by applying to host an upcoming mayoral debate. He has also submitted to the board a modernization plan that would bring the venue up to entertainment industry standards through capital projects, improvements in the box-office operation and refinements in management.

"Today, it's all about service to the ticket buyer," Mr. Presser said. "It matters a lot if the seat is uncomfortable, if the air conditioning is not working, if the bathroom situation is not acceptable."

The physical changes will prove challenging for a 92-year-old building that is landmarked on the inside and outside—and whose air rights are long gone.

Still, Mr. Presser said, "we can change the way we do business. Our customers are not only the ticket-buying public, but also the promoters that rent our building, the media and the government."

Bringing all that together shouldn't be too hard. The hall was built for it.

Write to Pia Catton at pia.catton@wsj.com

Email


Print

Save


0 Comments

Order Reprints


WSJ In-Depth




Obama Scales Back Budget Goals




Interactive: Faces of the Affordable Care Act




CDC: Antibiotic Overuse Can Be Lethal



Why This Computer Mouse Rules




Inside a Stunning Comeback



China Calibrates its Response to Attack


1

MH370's Disappearance



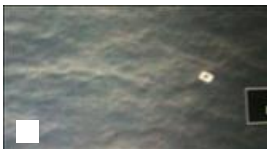
2

If You Invested \$10K at Dow Bottom, Five Years Ago




3

Debris Sighting Is a Cold Lead in Search for MH370




4

Weak Links in Malaysian Aviation Security Revealed



5

Malaysia Airlines Facing Market Woes



SPONSORED LINKS

Best Dividend Paying Stocks

Free Credit Score

Best Family Cars

Credit Cards For Good Credit

Best Mortgage Rates

10 Best Mutual Funds

Best Bond Funds

Best Credit Cards For Points

Best IRA Accounts

High Interest Savings

Add a Comment

JOURNAL COMMUNITY

Community rules

To add a comment please

Log in

Create an Account

Your real name is required for commenting.

☐ Track replies to my comment

CLEAR

POST

WHAT DOES A DOLLAR GET YOU TODAY?

For a limited time

ONLY \$1 A WEEK FOR 12 WEEKS

SUBSCRIBE NOW»

A ¼ gallon of gas... or stories that go the extra mile?

WSJ SUBSCRIBER'S CONTENT PROVIDES:

- *Inform your decisions:* with award-winning news and in-depth analysis.
- *Access the world:* with reporting from 1900+ journalists across 45 countries.
- *Speak confidently:* with coverage of the global markets, technology, real estate and culture.

Subscribe / Login

Back to Top

Customer Service

Customer Center

New! Live Help

Contact Us

WSJ Weekend

Contact Directory

Corrections

Policy

Privacy Policy

Cookie Policy

Data Policy

Copyright Policy

Subscriber Agreement & Terms of Use

Your Ad Choices

Ads

Advertise

Place a Classified Ad

Sell Your Home

Sell Your Business

Commercial Real Estate Ads

Recruitment & Career Ads

Franchising

Advertise Locally

Tools & Features

Apps

Emails & Alerts

Graphics & Photos

Columns

Topics

Guides

Portfolio

Old Portfolio

More

Register for Free

Reprints

Content Partnerships

Conferences

SafeHouse

Mobile Site

News Archive