

Irish Rep is now its own landlord

By Joseph Hurley
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Last week, the gods smiled big time on the Irish Repertory Theatre.

On Thursday morning, Feb. 15, the theater's creators and guiding forces, Ciaran O'Reilly and Charlotte Moore, journeyed to the offices of the M&T Bank and participated in the lengthy closing ceremony that, in effect, has made them their own landlords. After a lengthy fundraising campaign, they were finally able to buy two floors of the building in which they've been producing plays for the last 12 years.

On Monday, Feb. 12, Rocco Landesman, the president of Jujamcyn Theaters, had given the Rep a shot of great news that O'Reilly and Moore had neither anticipated nor expected. Landesman announced that the 22nd Jujamcyn Award, which is worth \$100,000 and is given annually to a resident theater "for development of creative talent," would be awarded this year to the Irish Rep.

The company was established modestly 19 years ago, and spent its early days in a variety of rented theaters in Manhattan — ranging from West 42nd Street through to the West Village — until it settled at 132 West 22nd St., the space that has now officially become its own.

Actress Charlotte Moore, the Irish Rep's unflagging artistic director, received the good news from Jujamcyn with a characteristic lack of pretension. "At least it'll keep us out of the poorhouse and I won't have to have my mail forwarded to Riker's Island," she said.

The first seven seasons of the Irish Repertory Theatre's life with the troupe working out of whatever venue happened to be available.

Moore is fond of reminding friends and strangers of the number of toilets she scrubbed in the years when the Rep, then the theatrical equivalent of a hermit crab, had no home of its own and had to make do with what it could find.

During the past decade, the Rep rented or leased the street-level floor, where its main stage is located, and the cellar space

which the group converted into a smaller performance area they named the W.Scott McCullucas Theatre.

Ten years ago, the Rep took over rehearsal and office space on the building's upper floors on a lease basis, which is how things will stand henceforth, awaiting the day when the group might see fit to buy the entire building.

Patrick Kelsey, the Irish Rep's managing director, recalls the construction of the theater's subterranean space, which had been the site of a disused pharmaceutical warehouse.

"All the work was done by Irish workers laboring for nothing," he recalled. "The materials cost half-a-million dollars. Now, 12 years later, trying to do the same thing would be unrealistic. Just trying to find a space in this city, is expensive and difficult."

O'Reilly, the Rep's producing director, puts the organization's purposes succinctly: "To own a piece of the rock where people such as Dion Bouicault and the team of Harrigan and Hart, among so many others, flourished in the past is to continue the lineage of Irish and Irish-American theater."

He added: "We are extremely proud to carry on this rich tradition, and owning our own place insures that the torch will be passed to future generations who enjoy our kinds of theater."

The group's primary auditorium will henceforth be known as the Francis J. Greenberger Theater, in recognition of the contribution made by the principal of Times Equities, a real estate organization with properties all over the area.

Greenberger gave the Rep \$1 million.

At the time of the closing, the Rep's capital campaign had raised or had been pledged \$4.7 million of a purchase price pegged at nearly \$5.5 million.

Earlier on, the capital campaign was estimated as having a goal of \$6 million, which included the cost of renovation and campaign expenses. Also part of the Rep's goal is an endowment, which Kelsey refers to as "a sort of nest egg, an amount of money making



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money for the theater."

In order to achieve their goals, and make the closing a reality, the theatre borrowed money. The donor was M&T Bank. "They gave us the mortgage," says Kelsey, closing the gap between what we had and what we needed."

The Irish Rep's capital campaign will continue after the closing, in the interest of, among other things, developing the "nest egg" to which Kelsey referred.

The Rep's capital campaign raised a total of 2.25 million dollars, including money from the City Council, from the Mayor's office and from the Manhattan Borough President's office, plus contributions from the Empire State Development Corporation, the office of Assembly member Richard Gottfried and the Office of Parks, Recreation and Historical Preservation.

The Irish Rep's Board of Directors, headed by Ellen



Charlotte Moore and Ciaran O'Reilly.

McCourt, wife of author Frank McCourt, was also supportive, as were numerous foundations and individuals, many of whom Kelsey says, "have been our loyal, longterm supporters."

One quarter that didn't help, he says, was Citibank, with whom the theater had worked for years.

"They wouldn't meet with us," he recalls, "or even talk with us about it."