

THE REHEARSAL CLUB Founded 1913

Alumnae Newsletter

“To tell the story of The Rehearsal Club, to preserve its legacy and inspire the future generations of aspiring artists.”



LIE KILLEY

A LETTER FROM OUR LEADER

The RC Hits the News!

For those of you who read the May, 2009 issue of Equity News, you saw our **“Calling All Alums”** article and the picture of all who attended Kathy Conry’s road production of *To Kill A Mockingbird* (*see full article on our website*). That article brought forth our link to _____, a professional documentary team who presented their proposal at our June 7 General Meeting to document our history on film. To that end, and until details are finalized with this new team, we took advantage of an angel in our midst to put three of our older stories, Phyllis Jeanne Creore(93), Alice Middleton Anderson (___) and Lenka Peterson (___) on HD tape to be incorporated with the fuller project at a later date. The angel in our midst is documentarian Rick McKay, who did **Broadway: The Golden Age**, airing on PBS. Thank you, Rick, for helping us get started!



Christina Gillespie, Cameron Taylor, Michele Mason, Denise Pence, Terry Baughan, Melinda Tanner, Phyllis Creore, Kathy Conry & Mary Jane Houdina

PHYLLIS CREORE WESTERMANN

Awarded the first “Key to Cinderella’s Heart”



As part of our goal to help reconnect each of us, Renata Vigoda has designed a beautiful key with colored ribbons representing all our interlocking relationships.





**2nd Annual
AidsWalk(NY)
RC Team**

\$1,600 Raised!

Thank you to all who contributed!

THE RC IS LINKEDIN!

Many of our alumnae don't even have computers, much less a full understanding on how to make the most of the social networking taking place on Facebook, Twitter and – you guessed it – LinkedIn. However, we are trying to come up to speed. To that end, we've created a Rehearsal Club "group" on the more professional site, LinkedIn. Join us – and let us know if it helps you connect with others among us.

SPREAD THE WORD!

For those computerfobes out there – did you know "sunnygram.com" can connect you to us (and your family and friends) with photos and e-mails sent by snailmail (the postman) in the form of a newsletter for only \$9.95 a month? You won't need to send our editor a self-addressed, stamped envelope just to receive this! It fills the gap between phone calls and visits!

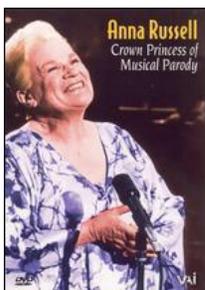
No computer? Find one at any library, sign up and hook into the rest of us on a regular basis.

BOOK PROJECTS

The House on West 53rd Street (working title) is the first full history of the Rehearsal Club ever written, covering its humble but prestigious beginnings in Progressive-Era New York to its closing during the fiscally devastated 1970s. This ongoing documentary research for the book has thus far taken **KATHLEEN VESTUTO** to nine onsite archival resources, and has given her the opportunity to personally interview over 30 individuals. She is especially grateful to the 20 former Club residents – from the 1930s through the '70s – who have to date generously shared their stories. If you haven't yet spoken with Kathy, she looks forward to including you in this remarkable and loving adventure. Email katves@aol.com. All interviewees will sign a standard interview release guaranteeing their approval of interview material prior to submission for publication. A percentage of any profits generated by the book will go to The Actors Fund.

The Rehearsal Club: Untold Stories of the Real Stage Door is also still in the works. This collection of personal memoirs written by former residents in their own voice and arranged by decade (1930s-1970s) requires submitting copyrighted material, *retaining your individual rights*, as part of this collection. Each contributing author will share equally among all contributing authors upon publication.

Inquiries or full, copyrighted stories (*preferably no longer than twenty pages*) should be submitted to **Lee Kelley** at msleekelley@msn.com or **Denise Pence** at deboocks@aol.com. If you cannot, for whatever reason, submit a story written and copyrighted in your own words, we encourage you to contact Kathy Vestuto. Preserving our individual histories is the main goal.



SHE'S BACK!

ANNA RUSSELL was probably one of the most talked-about, and talkative, Rehearsal Club women who ever set pink satin pump upon a stage. So it was natural that three of her Club friends joined in celebrating Anna when British singer-actress **SYLLA HASKELL** brought her one-woman show, *Wannabe Divas*, to Guild Hall at the Episcopal Actors' Guild in April, 2009.



Marion O'Connor Ragsdale (RC 1947 – 1951), Alice Middleton Anderson (RC 1947 - 1949), and Mary Jo Carroll Cavanaugh (RC 1944 – 1948) sat with reminiscing smiles as Ms. Haskell outlined Anna's eccentricities as a nightingale. Familiar as they were with Anna's signature comedy, they laughed along with the packed hall at digital clips of Anna's *The Ring of the Nibelung (An Analysis)*.

“The Valkyries!” Anna’s ear-splitting Lady Bountiful cadenzas crashed against the Guild’s ancient walls like an aural tsunami. “They are the *noisiest* people! They’re all of them virgins.” (Beat.) “And I’m not a *bit* surprised!”

Anna Russell, who was born in London in 1911 and died in Australia in 2006, was actually a talented musician who turned her thwarted operatic ambitions into pure gold. From the 1950s to the 1980s, she created memorable – and well-informed – musical satires in best-selling recordings, on television and in sold-out concerts around the world.

But in the late 1940s and early ‘50s, when Anna stayed at the Rehearsal Club, her humor was not always appreciated. She was she a female performing standup, at that time almost exclusively a man’s arena. And her focus, classical music, was often considered too specialized.

In addition, as Marion says, Anna “never had any compunction about sitting at the piano in the parlor” and gleefully letting rip for whoever happened to hear – which was usually, inescapably, the entire house and most of West 53rd Street. Anna would, according to Alice, sweep in the front door after a touring engagement and make her presence known by blaring, “I’m *back!*”

Although she may have been an acquired taste to some during her Club days, her support of her former home was sincere and long-lasting. Mary Jo recalls Anna's special benefit performance for the Club at Philharmonic Hall in the 1970s, followed by a reception in one of Anna's previous preferred performance venues, the Club parlor.

In her later years, Anna would occasionally join the group of Club alumni known as "Les Girls" – including Marion, Alice, and Mary Jo – in lunches or dinners on the town.

Marion, in particular, renewed a lasting friendship long after their Club stay, while Anna was residing in Marion's hometown of Toronto. "I actually knew her better later on," Marion says, "than I did at the Club."

She brought photos. Mary Jo and Alice passed them back and forth to one another, chuckling. There was Anna, plump, impossibly blonde and beaming, relaxing in a patio chair; signing her autobiography; waving goodbye to Marion from a sedan.

"R-r-remember the r-r-ring?" Anna trilled on the video, sweeping her voluminous pink gown that could have been curtains ripped from a diva's boudoir window. Wherever she got it, Marion had hemmed it – no small feat, considering the infinite, diaphanous yardage.

Ms. Haskell received a hearty ovation for her presentation. Guild Executive Vice President Peter Von Berg then requested her assistance in raffling off a bottle of champagne. Ms. Haskell, Anna-like, dramatically plunged her arm into a shoebox full of raffle tickets, shuffled them around, and drew out a name.

"Marion Ragsdale!"

Marion remained seated for a few moments. Then she stepped up on the stage and accepted the champagne.

"Anna would have enjoyed this," she said.

Marion, Alice and Mary Jo stayed for the after-party, then strolled along the curved, gothic garden path outside the Hall into the spring evening. Marion studied her prize. "Hmm," she said. "I think she's here."

She glanced up at the cobalt sky and smiled. "Thanks, Anna," she said.

Kathy Vestuto



Anna Russell, ca. early 1950s. (From The Times of London Online)

GOINGS ON:

MELINDA TANNER: REVELATIONS:
from the closet of a hate group
From the creators of WERE the WORLD MINE.

WORLD PREMIERE
SATURDAY JUNE 6 @ 3p
NewFest Film Festival, NYC
SVA 333 W 23rd

On a recent visit to NY, _____, visited with fellow alum

ELIZABETH HODES: Now in rehearsal for an excerpt from Terrence McNally's *Master Class*, in which Maria Callas (Liz) is coaching Juilliard student, Sharon Graham (Loretta Edmonds), in the aria *Vieni t'affretta*, sung by Lady Macbeth, in Verdi's *Macbeth*.

IN MEMORIUM

Cornelia Ellis Wallace had lived at the Rehearsal Club in the early '60s. I happened to be researching her again for tidbits and found that I didn't realize she died in January



Several RC women met to enjoy New York's July 4th Fireworks this summer . . . this photo was taken from _____ window . . .