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Shock Greets Move to Close Amato Opera in May

By DANIEL J. WAKIN
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Like an old and comfy easy chair in New York's cultural [salon](#), the Amato Opera has served up homemade productions for 60 years in basement theaters, always under the loving care of Anthony Amato and, until her death in 2000, his wife, Sally.

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Katie Orlinsky for The New York Times
The tiny Bowery opera house.

But this weekend a note from Mr. Amato was posted on the refrigerator in the offstage area at the company's home in a small building on the Bowery in the East Village: he was shutting down the company after this season.

“Now, with Sally gone, I have decided that it is time for me to start a new chapter in my life,” the note read. “It has been a great 60-year run!”

In an interview on Monday, Mr. Amato said he had sold the building; the club [CBGB](#) was a neighbor for years before it, too, closed.

“I'm 88 years old, and I'm a little tired,” he said. “I have a few years left.” Mr. Amato said he might write his memoirs and wants to establish a foundation to give awards to young singers, conductors and directors. He also plans to study scores, especially Wagner's.

In the meantime the company will finish the season with productions of “La Bohème” and “The Marriage of Figaro.” The final performance is scheduled for May 31.

Mr. Amato said he had decided to shut down the company because he feared its quality would suffer without his dedication.

“I have my sad moments, and I have my happy moments,” he said. “My happy moments come when I feel I will finally have some time instead of meeting a [schedule](#) every day, which is so difficult for me to sustain.”

The Amato Opera is as far from the [Metropolitan Opera](#) as high school hoops are from the [N.B.A.](#), but it is a beloved part of the constellation of small performing-arts companies in the city. The performances can be uneven, and the “orchestra” usually consists of a keyboard and a few winds. But tickets are inexpensive — \$35 — and the 107-seat theater provides unusual intimacy.

It has also provided a welcome forum for young singers and up-and-coming professionals to try out repertory and gain stage experience, as well as for serious amateurs who want to keep singing. Amato [veterans](#) include established [opera](#) performers like the mezzo-soprano Mignon Dunn and the tenor Jon Frederic West.

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David Freiman, a baritone who performed in Sunday's final performance of "The Merry Widow," started with the company at 10 and has been involved for 36 years.

"I was shocked," he said, when he heard the news from a fellow singer on [Facebook](#). "I went through all the stages of grief simultaneously."

"It's been a place for singers around the country to get [training](#)," he added. "So many singers get a chance to get onstage here and try out a role in costume with instruments and full scenery and makeup, and the whole production. And where are they going to find that? There are just very few opportunities to find that in this country."

Mr. Amato has directed and conducted most of the performances, and his wife handled lighting, costumes and finances. Since her death, some of those duties have been taken over by Irene Frydel Kim, Mr. Amato's niece.

With an average of six productions a season, the company has given thousands of performances, mostly of war horses but occasionally of rarely heard works. Its repertoire includes 60 operas. The company also has a successful Saturday morning children's series of shortened operas.

The Amatos founded the company in 1948, and the first performances were in the auditorium of Our Lady of Pompeii Church in Greenwich Village, where bingo was often played. After several stops, the company settled in 1962 into the building at 319 Bowery, near Second Street, which the Amatos had bought and renovated.

Dapper as always in a dark suit, the courtly Mr. Amato made no announcement at Sunday's matinee performance. He held the usual raffle at intermission, giving away Amato Opera T-shirts this time.

A longtime patron, George Sulkhan, mourned the closing. "Every time I come here, it's special," he said. "To me this is the grandest of the grand. It's the smallest place, but it's the biggest place."

After the show Mr. Amato took off his tie and jacket and joined the cast in striking the set.

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