

ADIRONDACK LIFE

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION » by Anne Mackinnon

Tahawus Lodge

HOW AN ESTEEMED BALLET COMPANY CHOSE AU SABLE FORKS

Rebecca Kelly and Craig Brashear can't remember when they first noticed the old Masonic lodge building. For almost 25 years it was simply a large, semi-derelict structure at the end of Main Street, the first thing that met their gaze when they drove into town.

The town itself, Au Sable Forks, inspired no particular loyalty: it was just the closest place to get gas and groceries, a 20-minute drive from the cabin they'd built near Silver Lake.

How things have changed. Over the past few years Kelly and Brashear have gotten to know Au Sable Forks well, and they've joined the ranks of its most enthusiastic movers, shakers and boosters. As for the building—the Tahawus Lodge, built in 1911 and rechristened the Tahawus Lodge Center, or TLC—they have become intimate with every inch, down to its last floorboard and water pipe. No

longer outsiders or summer people, they seem destined to serve as the long-term guardians of a local landmark that's also the anchor for a revitalized downtown.

So what happened? Honestly, Kelly and Brashear are not entirely sure. The process started, Kelly says, when a friend, another seasonal resident, asked her to join a planning committee for a local arts center.

The group had its eye on a different spot, the local movie theater, also long shuttered. That particular project never got off the ground—the building has now reopened as the Hollywood Theatre—but, for Kelly, “the seed was planted.”

From then on, she saw Au Sable Forks through different eyes: whenever she and Brashear stopped at the flashing light at the edge of town and looked across the river toward Main Street, they found themselves admiring that big, mysterious building and wondering what could be done to spruce it up. It seemed a shame to let it sit there, neglected. Maybe, they thought, they could volunteer to apply a coat of paint. They asked around and were told, Brashear recalls, that “if we wanted to paint the building, we'd have to buy it first.”

That news set them back, but the idea wouldn't go away. Buying the building made a certain amount of sense. Their New York City-based dance company, Rebecca Kelly Ballet, had been performing and teaching in the North Country for decades, but they had no permanent base in the Adirondacks. They didn't have a lot of cash, but they did have a nonprofit through which to handle the purchase: the Appleby Foundation, which had allowed them to manage the grants, donations and income that supported the dance company. They were becoming convinced.

Not that the lodge was for sale, exactly. Still owned by the



Clockwise from above: Rebecca Kelly and Craig Brashear began renovating the former Masonic lodge in 2009. The Tahawus Lodge Center, new home to the Rebecca Kelly Ballet, with an art gallery and commercial space, opened its doors in January 2011.



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remnants of a once-thriving group of Masons, the place had fallen into disrepair but not into total disuse: a handful of members still met there, in an upstairs room. The Masons understood that the building was too large for their purposes, and remodeling it to accommodate tenants was beyond their means. But selling seemed like a drastic step. It took about a year of discussion, much of it dedicated to dispelling the notion that the prospective buyers were mere outsiders with no commitment to the town, to negotiate the terms of the sale.

The purchase was completed in July 2009, and Kelly and Brashear began to clean and rehabilitate in earnest. One of the people they contacted early on was Steven Engelhart, director of Adirondack Architectural Heritage, in Keeseville, who

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helped connect them with several architects and designers. After much deliberation, they decided not to go the “historic restoration route—although the building might eventually look as if we did,” Kelly adds. They felt they needed more flexibility—in terms of both design and budget—than a strict commitment to restoration would allow. They also recognized that the work would have to be done in phases, as money became available.

They had no choice but to begin with structural repairs to the basement, the ground floor and the two floors above, as well as asbestos removal. With the building in more secure condition, they moved on to repairing and painting the interior walls and exterior trim, constructing the street-level facade and renovating a gallery and potential commercial space on the ground floor. A \$70,000 New York State matching grant, part of a larger business-district revitalization project, helped launch the first phase, and TLC continues to receive support from the New York State Council on the Arts, Community Bank and many other local businesses and individuals, including an army of volunteers. Moral, logistical and

strategic support comes from an energetic steering committee, whose 20-plus members range from local businesspeople to regional artists and writers.

The Tahawus Lodge Center and its Windows of Change Gallery opened to the public in January 2011 with a community celebration and an exhibition by photographer and Au Sable Forks resident Mark Hobson. Hobson’s show, *The Forks: There’s No Place Like Home*, was the perfect kickoff. “Mark is a lot like us,” Kelly explains, “because he really believes in the idea of Au Sable Forks as a revitalized hub, a place where people can come together.” Hobson followed up with a second exhibit in April and more shows are in the works, including an exhibition this summer on the late Upper Jay artist and theme-park designer Arto Monaco, sponsored by the Arto Monaco Historical Society.

But the real breakthrough will come in August, when Rebecca Kelly Ballet offers its first dance classes at TLC: a choreography workshop for teens and adults, plus two Kids Co-Motion classes, for children up to age six and for toddlers (with an adult). Kelly and Brashear have taught in Lake Placid, Potsdam, Plattsburgh, New York City and elsewhere around the state, but never before in Au Sable Forks. Brashear estimates that their work in the North Country alone has “touched more than 1,000 families with experiences that were vivid and enriching for young people, even if they don’t become dancers or even passionate appreciators of dance.”

As time goes on, Kelly and Brashear expect to expand their dance offerings at TLC. Some classes they’ll teach themselves, but some will be taught, they hope, by other instructors who want to rent TLC’s high-quality studio space for their own classes in yoga, Pilates, karate or dance. The TLC advisory board is brainstorming a schedule of workshops that will be both popular and worthwhile. “It’s important to us,” says Kelly, “to connect with the town and listen to what people say they need.”

If things go according to plan, TLC will also lease space to commercial tenants. The idea is to create a modest but steady stream of income to support arts

programs, while generating economic activity for Au Sable Forks. What might work at TLC? The steering committee has discussed a variety of ideas. A fishing outfitter and tackle shop? A restaurant overlooking the river? A farm market specializing in local produce? The space is beautiful and flexible, so any of those might fit right in.

For Tahawus Lodge, a mixed bag of activities is economically sound and historically authentic. Until it fell into disrepair, the building had always been a multi-use kind of place. In the late 1950s, when my family first moved to Au Sable Forks, the local U.S. Post Office was in the spacious storefront. (I remember, at age three, gazing in wonderment at the soaring, pressed-tin ceiling. It’s still there.) For many decades the local newspaper, the *Adirondack Record*, and a letterpress print shop operated on the ground floor, below the street but just above the water level of the river. Meanwhile, the Masons and the Order of the Eastern Star gathered upstairs for meetings and special events. From the top floor they looked out over a bustling Main Street, up and down the West Branch of the Ausable River, and across the valley to the hills surrounding the town.

As the principals of the Rebecca Kelly Ballet company, Kelly and Brashear bring to TLC their long experience in the arts and their thorough knowledge of the rocky shoals of nonprofit sustainability. As artists, they have the determination to get things done; as nonprofit managers, they have the savvy to make things work.

In Au Sable Forks, they’ve broken down the invisible divide between year-round and seasonal residents. Much of the credit for that, they say, goes to their “amazing” board and a visionary core of local leaders. “Craig and I would never have had the confidence to move forward without the encouragement and careful guidance of our remarkable town supervisor, Randy Douglas, and the indefatigable Main Street Revitalization chair, Sue Pulitzer,” Kelly explains. “There are a lot of really wonderful people in Au Sable Forks,” she says. Now, thanks to a formerly dilapidated building and a dream, there are two more. 🌿