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## *New Parts Of Town For Spoleto Festival*

By **Rick Lyman**

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The Rev. Julius Barnes, pastor of St. Luke's Reformed Episcopal Church, wasn't all that sure what to think when officials from the Spoleto Festival U.S.A. approached him about building a sculpture garden on the 110-year-old church's side lawn.

"At first, I was a little concerned," he said. The proposal by the artist, Martha Jackson-Jarvis, called for a cluster of structures built of oyster shell, concrete, wrought iron and tile, drawing on symbols of the black experience in the surrounding Carolina Lowcountry. "There was mention of old African gods and other things. I wasn't sure how my people would respond."

Now, the finished work, colorful and strange, draws a steady stream of curious residents from the surrounding neighborhood, Charleston's working-class and largely black East Side. "People are very excited about it," Mr. Barnes said. "The church has had more visitors in the last few weeks than it has ever had. It's as though a spark has been lit in the community."

The Spoleto Festival, its 21st season unfolding in the parks, theaters and churches of Charleston, had generally confined itself to the opulent and historic streets near the southern tip of this city on a palm-flecked peninsula, having infrequent commerce with the poorer neighborhoods to the north.

Now, the festival is picking itself up following several seasons of internal strife and crippling money woes, hoping at long last to exorcise the memory of its founder, Gian Carlo Menotti, the Italian composer whose stormy battles with the festival board and rancorous departure in 1993 left Spoleto in artistic and financial flux.

"One of the things we've been doing, self-consciously doing, is trying to broaden the reach of the festival," said Nigel Redden, its general director. "Part of the purpose of the festival is to draw people into exploring Charleston, and parts of the city they might not otherwise explore. Plus, we are trying to take things to people who might not buy tickets, but for whom it is important to create a sense of festival."

The city's church-dappled, Caribbean-flavored southern tip has once again been engulfed by the festival. Spoleto posters adorn the historic storefronts. The restaurants buzz with talk about performances and artists, some of whom are little known in their own neighborhoods, yet suddenly find themselves surrounded by admirers.

Mr. Redden, who was Spoleto's general manager from 1986 to 1991 under Mr. Menotti, had a very public falling out with the composer and resigned, returning two years ago to attempt to rescue a festival that had a dwindling artistic reputation and a deficit of more than \$3 million.

Cranking up Spoleto's fund-raising machine and instituting firmer financial controls, Mr. Redden was able in 1996 to complete the festival with a small profit and to pay off about half of the accumulated debt. He expects to finish in the black this year, too.

"The financial crisis is over," Mr. Redden said. "It's rebuilding that's the issue now, regaining a sense of momentum, redefining the festival, reaffirming the sense of artistic excitement."

The 17-day festival, which opened on May 23, is in many ways similar to the festivals that existed under Mr. Menotti's control. It consists of 126 performances of 31 programs in performance spaces all over the city, traditional and cerebral, predominantly European in style and content. But there are also some changes that point to the direction Spoleto intends to move in the future.

Instead of featuring an audience-pleasing grand opera -- "La Traviata," for instance -- this year's festival chose Alban Berg's solemn and brooding "Wozzeck."

And while it is a common conceit to accompany a production of "Wozzeck" with one of Berg's "Lulu," Mr. Redden said, this year's festival chose instead to present a new interpretation called "Lulu Noire," a collaboration between the director and librettist Lee Breuer and the composer John Faddis that transplants the story to a be-bop era African-American milieu.

Spoleto has often shrewdly exploited Charleston's eclectic choice of performance spaces, and this year a production of Britten's "Curlew River," which Britten and his librettist, William Plomer, described as a "parable for church performance in one act" inspired by Japanese Noh theater, was performed in the city's atmospheric Circular Congregational Church.

Elsewhere was the familiar Spoleto melange: the latest work from the choreographer Twyla Tharp, a fantastical reinterpretation of "The Three Musketeers" by the Theatre de la Jeune Lune of Minneapolis, performances by Meredith Monk, the Westminster Choir and the Tai-Gu Tales Dance Theater of Taiwan, and works by composers from Verdi to Frank Zappa.

Perhaps most significant was the festival's decision to move out into the community with "Human/Nature," a series of environmental sculptures scattered around the city and surrounding area, including the one in Mr. Barnes's side yard.

Plans are being discussed to build on this expansion next year with co-commissioned appearances by the Paul Taylor dance troupe at Spoleto, the Koger Center in Columbia, S.C., and the Peace Center in Greenville, S.C. In addition, Mr. Taylor's other company, Taylor 2, would perform around the state for several weeks.

William Hewitt, president of the festival board, agreed with Mr. Redden that the immediate crisis had certainly passed, but he said the board would not be satisfied until Spoleto had a "sizable net worth, three or four years in a row of festivals in the black, growing in financial and artistic success, maybe an endowment and the capability to begin to plan our festivals two years in advance instead of one."

The continuing problem, he said, is ticket sales, which despite an increase in the last two years, are still far below the halcyon years of the late 80's and early 90's.

The board has asked McKinsey & Company, a consulting concern, to conduct a two-year study that will become the basis for a new marketing plan. "It is exactly the sort of thing that we were never able to do in the past," said Mr. Hewitt. "Gian Carlo Menotti wanted to run this festival like it was his festival. The kind of planning we're doing now could not have happened in 1991."

The festival was founded by Mr. Menotti in 1977, an American adjunct to the Festival of Two Worlds that he founded in the small Umbrian hill town of Spoleto in 1958.

"There were those who were opposed to it in the beginning," said Joseph P. Riley, who has been Charleston's Mayor for 20 years. "There were fears that this big, European festival would come in and overwhelm the local cultural institutions. Of course, just the opposite has happened. Charleston's cultural institutions are stronger than they've ever been, and Spoleto was the catalytic agent."

What was in 1977 a sleepy and declining city, has been transformed into a prosperous city of restaurants and tourists and teeming sidewalks. "Spoleto was critically important in making that happen," Mr. Riley said. "It was like turning on a water-sprinkler system in the desert on parched grass. It brought people to streets, created a spark of life. You know, it's true: A city, when it works hard to create something worthwhile, becomes a better city."

Spoleto Festival U.S.A., under Mr. Menotti's direction, grew steadily in stature until it became perhaps the most important and influential regional arts festival in the country, focusing on a shrewd blend of grand opera, popular works from the classical repertory and a generous helping of new, edgy material. By 1991, the festival was drawing large crowds and important artists and sitting on \$1.5 million in the bank.

Then, it all went sour.

Charging that Mr. Redden and some members of the board were being disloyal, Mr. Menotti demanded that they be removed or he would not return for the 1992 festival. Ostensibly, "the great unpleasantness," as it is still referred to in Spoleto circles, concerned a 1991 series of sculpture installations drawing on themes from Charleston's history. Mr. Menotti hated it, called it "rubbish" and tried to have it removed from the festival. Mr. Redden and the board members wanted to keep it. Accusations abounded of political plots and intrigues.

The exhibition, "Places With a Past," remained in the 1991 festival, but Mr. Redden resigned along with 23 of 56 board members. The tensions culminated in 1993 with the new board accepting the last of Mr. Menotti's threatened resignations.

Mr. Menotti returned home to Scotland and to running his Italian festival. A new general director was chosen, Milton Rhodes, head of the American Council for the Arts, in New York City; he was generally credited with saving the truncated 1994 festival. The 1995 festival, however, was a financial debacle.

This was the situation Mr. Redden inherited when he was rehired to put together the 1996 festival.

The answer, he said, is to mount a festival with "fiscally prudent growth" that presents "works for which you have to find an audience rather than works for which an audience already exists."

Mr. Barnes said he thought it was beginning to work. A group of his parishioners, who had never had anything to do with Spoleto before, are organizing a bus tour to look at the other "Human/Nature" installations. "And you know," he said, "I've been at this church for four years, and now, for the first time, I find myself interested in what's happening at the festival."

That is greatly satisfying to Mr. Redden. "I would love to build a black audience for 'Wozzeck,' " he said, paused and laughed. "I would love to build a white audience for 'Wozzeck.' "