



PHOTO: ANN HAUPRICH

An Artist's House

Towering mirrors help to reflect some of the rich history inside this 1845 Federal townhouse.

BY ANN HAUPRICH

IT'S NOT UNUSUAL TO OBSERVE A museum-like brass plaque near the entrance of historic homes in Saratoga County. What makes the official marker identifying the 1845 Federal townhouse at the corner of West High and Court Streets in Ballston Spa more than just a conversation piece is that the artist who designed it dwells within. In fact, the former front parlor of the stately brick abode has been converted into a spacious studio that houses a treasury of Phil Spaziani's origi-

nal works of art, many of which depict landmarks in and around the village.

The decision to alter the use of the 160-year-old room was made by Phil and his wife Lorraine and their three children after a gliding accident left the former high-school art teacher wheelchair-bound just over a decade ago. Since that time, he has largely devoted his talents to preserving local images on canvas for future generations. Some works, like his rendition of Brookside Museum, recently used as the

centerpiece of a 2004 Christmas ornament, are donated to not-for-profits to raise funds for worthy causes. Others have been reproduced on the covers of community telephone directories and corporate annual reports.

Opposite the room in which Phil draws and paints is a grand hallway that still bears wallpaper dating from before the time of The Great Depression. Standing at the entrance of the hallway, one cannot help but be drawn to the intricate turnings



PHOTO: KATE FOX

A cherished keepsake on display in the home of Phil Spaziani is the model ship, set in a glass case, that was built in Boston by Phil's late father. A towering mirror fills the length of a wall of one of house's parlors.



PHOTO: KATE FOX

that distinguish the railings of an antique chestnut and maple staircase that leads to the home's expansive second floor.

Perhaps even more intriguing, however, is what one sees when peering from the threshold into the second parlor at the other end of the hallway. Adorning the wall straight ahead is a towering mirror, one of two in the house, in an ornate golden frame that fills the entire 9 1/2 foot length from the gleaming hardwood floors to the vintage molded ceilings.

The majestic mirrors were already in the house when the Spazianis, who met when both were college art students in Boston in the late 1950s, acquired it from the estate of the late Mary Medbery just over three decades ago. It is believed the opulent mirrors were brought here from New Orleans by banker Samuel Gould, who lived in the Ballston Spa house from around 1866 to 1895. Matching gold-leaf valances adorn three window tops in the former front parlor. (A fourth is stored in

the basement.)

"We've heard that the valances were originally on much wider windows in a hotel lobby in New Orleans," explains Phil, noting that they were trimmed to fit the smaller widths of what by today's standards would be considered large windows at the front of this home. He and Lorraine also credit Gould with what they term "Victorianizing" the house, a project that included expanding the square footage of the original structure.

When welcoming visitors to their residence during the Annual House Tour sponsored by the Ballston Spa Business & Professional Association, the Spaziani's handed out a sketch Phil made that clearly shows the locations of the additions as well as the presence of two false chimneys, and an old kitchen chimney that has been capped and roofed over. The drawing also shows that the original service entrance used by the first occupants—Sanford and Angeline Smith, who owned

a hardware store in the village—is still in place, but has been bricked up beneath the Colonial Revival front porch. The porch was most likely constructed along with a bay window during the time of the Gould renovations.

The 1845 kitchen, which included a fireplace and a Dutch oven, has cabinets featuring brass and porcelain knobs and were painted with buttermilk paint, possibly colored with oxides from The Old Iron Spring on Front Street. That kitchen operated in the cellar until a rear addition, including a new kitchen, was built around 1895.

The turn-of-the-century kitchen was still in use when the Spazianis moved in at the dawn of the 1970s and was difficult for Lorraine, who is described by her husband as "one of the world's greatest cooks" to function in efficiently. Phil worked hard trying to redesign the space, But the presence of five doors made a

(Continued on page 57)

The Influence of Phil Spaziani

IF WALLS COULD TALK, PAUL CREMO, VICE-President of Film & Television at Sony Classical, is convinced visitors to the Spaziani home in Ballston Spa would join him in singing its praises as “a soul nourishing place that transcends brick and mortar.”

“The house is an attractive and beautifully put together edifice with a keenly observed sense of historical preservation and carefully integrated modern touches,” notes Cremo. What makes the residence so much more, he insists, is that the retired teacher who lives there has never stopped being a mentor to his former students. Cremo should know. The strong bonds of friendship between the two date back more than a quarter of a century to the late 1970s when the future music executive was part of a folksy band of high schoolers who sometimes put on concerts. Among those Cremo would spot in the audience were Phil Spaziani and his wife Lorraine.

“They invited us to their beautiful home and made us feel not only welcome and comfortable, but valued as friends—not just as students or kids. Phil’s dedication went beyond just teaching. As we moved on to college and later life, three of us (sometimes with others in tow) continued to come back to visit the Spazianis, sharing the events of our professional and personal lives. Gathering in the kitchen for Lorraine’s legendary cooking, relaxing in the comfort of the parlor, sitting on the front porch on a summer night, we’ve passed countless evenings in that magical house eating, laughing, reminiscing and trading stories. Christmases were always special times, with the house decorated beautifully, (including) a giant tree filled with antique ornaments, and of course, a selection of Lorraine’s heavenly goodies. After Phil’s accident, the house on West High Street became an even more important gathering place, as we sought to further strengthen the bond we had shared through the years, and to try to give back at least some of the support and encouragement and good will Phil and Lorraine had shared with us over the years.”

Maureen Pepper is now a professional artist living in London, England, where she has created costumes for such worldwide celebrations as the opening ceremonies of the Barcelona Olympics, the Atlanta Olympics, and the Commonwealth Games in Manchester, UK. Previously, Pepper worked for the Jim Henson Company (The Muppets) and tackled numerous assignments for television and films as well as completing an enormous amount of community based arts work.

Like Cremo, she credits Phil Spaziani with being a source of guidance and inspiration that endures to this day. “(Mr. Spaziani) had the very rare ability to make me feel that I could do anything—paint, draw, ceramics, photography....He was a wonderful teacher who always had time for even the untal-



PHOTO: ANN HARRIS/ETH

ented students and difficult students that other teachers had long given up on. He gave me my lifelong conviction that art is for everyone which underpins my work to this day.”

Xaque David Gruber, who has spent the past two years in Los Angeles as an apprentice to executive producers Henry Winkler and Michael Levitt on such TV productions as Hollywood Squares, The Happy Days Reunion Special and The Dallas Reunion Special, also credits Phil Spaziani with instilling a special love for creativity in all its forms in him at an early age.

Gruber, whose other credits include writing and illustrating *A Big Adventure In The Smallest State*, a history of Rhode Island for all ages and directed a documentary called Laurel Casey: *The Hurting Truth*, that traveled to six national film fests in the past year, insists it was Phil Spaziani’s “enthusiasm for and nurturing of” his high school art work that motivated him to accomplish the things he has in life. Gruber, who earned accolades as a school teacher before embarking upon his more recent career in television, says he is grateful for the friendship with his former art teacher and mentor that has grown and sustained over the years.

“Influences like his comes once in a lifetime, if you’re lucky. He’s the gem of gems!” observes Gruber.

As a high school freshman, Leslie Connor, author of *Miss Bridie Chose a Shovel* (Houghton Mifflin) and a young adult

novel, *Dead On Town Line*, (Dial Books for Young Readers), got nervous when "Mr. S" passed behind her chair and looked at her work, cautioning: "Be careful now!"

Recalls Connor: "Mr. S would go to his shelf and bring back several books open to pages of remarkable art of all types and just drop them off beside me, sometimes not saying anything. I came to realize that his alarming 'Be careful!' really meant: 'You have something, here. Slow down now and think for a minute. Look. Then get back to it again.'"

Through the years, Connor learned that there is much to be gained by stepping back from her work no matter what it is. "The lessons I learned in Mr. S's art room still apply. He has been a friend for life and has offered me much encouragement and inspiration over the nearly three decades since I last sat in his classroom."

But perhaps the most heart-warming story of all comes from Bonnie Gagnon, whose late daughter, Michelle, had a neuromuscular disease which confined her to a wheelchair. "When Michelle got to Scotia-Glenville High School, she met Mr. Spaziani, and they instantly bonded. He was also disabled and in a wheelchair, so they had something in common,

besides the love of art."

During Grade 11, Michelle became very sick and had to spend much of her last two years of high school in the hospital or at home with a tutor. But Mr. Spaziani made sure she did not miss her junior or senior proms. Recalls Michelle's mother: "Mr. Spaziani had an electric wheelchair that stood him upright. But because he had good upper body strength, he usually used his manual wheelchair. Michelle did not have much strength and always used her electric chair, but hers did not stand upright. When it came to the Junior Prom, Mr. Spaziani offered this very expensive power wheelchair to her, so that she could 'dance' at her prom. He also came to the walk-in to watch her 'walk' into the prom that night, smiling from ear to ear. It was a very special night for her, one she'd never forget."

Thanks to Phil Spaziani's generosity, Michelle also had happy memories of "dancing" at her senior prom. The art teacher with a big heart subsequently attended Michelle's graduation party at her family's home, and gave her a very special gift, one of his paintings, which her mother says she treasured until the day she died. —Ann Hauprich

(Continued from page 55)
good solution impossible.

"One door led from the kitchen to a pantry; a second to a cellar; a third to a dining room; a fourth to a back hallway; and a fifth to a back staircase. All those doors meant no countertops on which to prepare food," recalls Lorraine.

The redesign was in limbo for many years until Lorraine noticed a strange huge sag in the dining room ceiling. Trying to determine the cause of the problem, Phil cut an access hole in a section of it and when he put his head up through, was astonished to discover thousands of bare nails pointing up at an old plaster ceiling—ten inches above!

Instead of replastering when the ceiling needed to be repaired, previous owners had installed a new ceiling over the old one—twice. Now those two "new" ceilings had finally pulled away from the original plaster and were being supported only by the crown molding around the edge!

The consequent repairs led to the discovery that the wall between the dining room and kitchen was not a supporting wall as previously thought. Removing the wall opened new possibilities.

The contemporary dream kitchen Phil designed showcases Lorraine's collection of more than 200 cookbooks, as well as

antique stoneware the couple, who share a love of pottery, bought at a variety of auctions over the years.

A prized appliance in the otherwise modern kitchen is a 1935 General Electric monitor top refrigerator that originally stood in Phil's boyhood home in Massachusetts. "It weighs more than a huge, modern fridge, but doesn't take up much space," says Phil, adding the antique "runs like a charm and makes the same soothing tinkly-whirring sound I listened to as a child."

Another cherished keepsake from what was once Phil's parents' home now graces a spot in his studio: It's a huge model ship in a cherry-framed glass case; both the ship and display case were constructed years ago by his late father in Boston.

Asked which room he likes the most, Phil smiles and responds: "My favorite room in the house is not in the house—it's the new deck out back."

When it was completed in the summer of 2003, it marked the first time Phil had been able to enjoy his backyard since his disabling 1991 accident. The same year Phil became a paraplegic, his brother Fred passed away of cancer.

"He was too sick to come and see me when I was recuperating from my accident and I was not in any condition at the time to travel to see him," recalls Phil of



The official marker identifying the 1845 Federal townhouse at the corner of West High and Court Streets in Ballston Spa was designed by the house's owner, Phil Spaziani.

the heartbreaking time in their lives. In a final act of caring, however, Phil's brother bequeathed a sum of money that was ultimately freed by his estate for the construction of the deck that today bears an engraved plaque with the words: "The Big Fat Fred Memorial Deck." (It should be noted that Phil's late brother was very thin; the inscribed nickname actually a fraternal term of endearment.)

Clearly, the house at the corner of West High and Court Streets in Ballston Spa is built on a foundation made as strong by love as by bricks and mortar. One can only hope a painting of it by Phil will some day grace the cover of a local history book. **SL**