

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: MORNINGSIDE HEIGHTS; From Court House to Opera House

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The law came first for Judge Richard Owen, who fulfilled his childhood dream of becoming a trial lawyer before taking his seat on the bench of Federal District Court. But the judge, who has presided over cases ranging from the Mafia Commission to the suit against George Harrison, who was found to have subconsciously plagiarized the tune for "My Sweet Lord," has also passionately pursued his avocation: composing operas.

His eighth opera, "Sadie Thompson," is based on a 1919 Somerset Maugham story called "Rain," about the tragic encounter between a missionary and a prostitute in American Samoa. This month, an uncostumed performance was presented at Musical Theater Works on Lafayette Street, to spur interest among producers. Featured were the judge's wife, Lynn Owen, whom he describes as a "dramatic soprano," and who has appeared in most of his operas, and Richard Holmes, a baritone from the Metropolitan Opera.

Opera and the law might seem like an odd combination, but Judge Owen sees a correlation. "The courtroom has to be viewed as a form of theater," he said. "You are putting on your witnesses and putting on a kind of show. Of course, in opera you can fix your lines. In the courtroom, you can't."

Judge Owen, who lives in Morningside Heights, began to study composing shortly after graduating from Harvard Law School in 1950 and moving back to New York to practice law. In the early 60's, when he had his own law firm, he attended three years of conservatory at the Manhattan School of Music, "between trying cases," he said. He met his wife at the Tanglewood festival, and their two sons are musical as well; one is an opera conductor, while the other, who toured as a boy soprano, became a lawyer.

Judge Owen's other operas have included "Tom Sawyer," "Abigail Adams" and "Mary Dyer," based on the life of a Quaker martyr who struggled for religious freedom. "I like to write about people and situations of consequence," the judge said. "I couldn't write about a motorcycle gang, for instance." His music, he said, tends to be "tonal," meaning you can sing it, and has both contemporary and traditional elements. "'Sadie' has a lot of ragtime in it," he said.

The judge has other talents as well, said his friend Maurice Nessen, a lawyer who has known Judge Owen since the 50's, when they worked together in the United States Attorney's office. Mr. Nessen also writes novels and plays on the side, and sometimes critiques Judge Owen's plots. Judge Owen is a good sailboat skipper and is computer-savvy, he said, but he stopped short of calling him a Renaissance man. "His tennis is not so hot." JANET ALLON

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