

The curse of the Cort

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By BARBARA HOFFMAN

TO the untrained eye, the Cort Theatre looks like any other small, Broadway house, down to its red curtains and neoclassical façade.

While it enjoyed a string of long runs after its 1912 opening, if recent history's any indication, the West 48th Street theater is the Great White Way's Bermuda triangle — swallowing up shows as swiftly as they open.

Take "Hollywood Arms." Even with Hal Prince at the helm, Carol Burnett's drama didn't have a leg to stand on, closing two months after its Oct. 31, 2002 opening.

The Tony-nominated musical "A Year With Frog and Toad," which did just swimmingly at the New Victory Theatre, moved to the Cort and sank like a stone.

Mario Cantone's "Laugh Whore"? Choked after two months. And pity Farrah Fawcett: Her "Bobbi Bolland" shuttered before it opened, giving up the ghost after a single week of previews.

The last show to play the Cort was last season's revival of "On Golden Pond." Just as it started to flourish, its star attraction — James Earl Jones — came down with pneumonia and "Pond" iced over.

Now, on the eve of its latest production — the revival of "Barefoot in the Park," opening Feb. 16 — theater watchers wonder: Could the Cort be cursed?

To find out, The Post enlisted feng shui consultant



Christian Johns/Ton

Psychic Stephen Robinson tries to connect with spirits as feng shui consultant Judith Wendell uses the tools of her trade at the Cort Theater, home of many Broadway flops.

Judith Wendell and psychic Stephen Robinson to check it out.

Their verdict? Not promising.

Armed with the tools of her trade — a pendulum

and a copper stick called a dowser — Wendell first checked the energy, or chi, of the stretch between Sixth and Seventh avenues.

"It's a pretty low-energy

block," she concludes. "The theater is also the smallest building on either side of the block — it doesn't stand out at all." Not helping matters is the parking lot sign that "obliviates" the Cort's signage

— and the fact that 48th is an east-bound block, its traffic moving away from the Theater District proper.

Pausing near the box office, she checked her pendulum for signs of "unhappy spirits." No ghosts there, she says, but she did feel "negative thought forms of previous tenants . . . unhappy actors, illness, hardship, sadness."

Compounding it was the "kerfluffle" that occurred at her visit Friday night — when one woman theatergoer raised a stink about having her bag searched.

Things got worse when Wendell entered the house itself, where she found herself in a cramped entranceway made more "oppressive" by the sloping mezzanine. Heavy curtains obscured the steep, "teeny staircase" up to the dimly lit box that held her seat.

"Forget if you're overweight or tall," she says. "This was like squeezing through a rabbit hole."

While she hadn't access to the backstage area or dressing rooms, she found the Cort's bathrooms bleak — especially the ladies room in the balcony, "all exposed plumbing with wooden doors like an outhouse, no mirror, and a sink across from a cracked window."

Between that and the "confused energy" all around her, she says, the signs are not good: "I'm not a theater critic, but this show isn't going to happen."

She suggests a cleansing — a ritualistic clearing with special smoke and bells, that's like "going

through with Mr. Clean" — to clear the air. At the very least, she says, the Cort needs a bigger sign, a flagpole or even a banner, just so people will know it's there.

Robinson, the psychic and founder of Manhattan's Holistic Studies Institute, was more hopeful about the show — but just as troubled by "the conflicting energy" emanating from every part of the theater, especially around the alcove near the first-floor bar.

It was there he felt the presence of a woman — "perhaps an actress, with medium-brown to light-colored hair . . . long deceased, who may have suffered something unpleasant — most likely a sexual assault."

He senses that it happened after hours, perhaps at the hands of someone who also worked on that production.

"I feel this woman didn't report it when it happened, and there was a great deal of shame," he says. "I don't think she's moved in, but I felt her spirit would return to that site, near the bar."

Throughout the theater, he says, he felt a sense of a conflict — from a business deal gone bad, he suspects. The feeling permeated the very front-row seat he sat in. It was there he saw "the bond" between the cast members as they took their bows, and the happy faces in the audience.

But all that conflicted energy, he says, is working against them.

"If this show lasts, it will drain the actors," he says. "It will be an uphill battle."