

▶FEATURE



Mindy McDaniel

**A Grand Show**

St. Anthony's Church will host an exhibit of some of the best regional artists this weekend—attesting to the power of grassroots community efforts

**By Shawn Stone**

**Photos by john whipple**

Jeff Root and I started talking about it a year or so ago," says Emily Collins, remembering the genesis of the idea of the site-specific exhibit *Vestuary Operatics*, the single-weekend show in St. Anthony's Church in Albany's Mansion Neighborhood this weekend (June 1-3).

This is a big step forward for the church and the neighborhood organization that owns—and is in the process of renovating—it, Grand Street Community Arts. This ambitious exhibit will likely bring more attention—and more visitors—to St. Anthony's than any previous event. The people closely involved with renovating the church were, Collins says, of necessity "stuck in this fund-raising, bureaucratic stage." Collins and Root, who were on the periphery of that effort, thought this was a way they could contribute to it. They hoped, she remembers, that if they reached out to artists in the community, there would be a generous response.

There was.

"I'm friends with Ryder," Collins explains, referring to C. Ryder Cooley. Troy-based, Cooley is in the Electronic Art MFA program at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. She is also becoming known for her haunting (haunted?) performances and film screenings around the area. Cooley, intrigued by both the idea and the church, suggested Collins contact Michael Oatman—who agreed to curate the exhibit, with Cooley.

This led to *Vestuary Operatics*, which, according to the program notes, will offer "performance, drawing, photography, sculpture and other



installations as a fleeting tribute to both the magnificent architecture and the crumbling decay found in the interior of St. Anthony's."

Or, as artist Nao Bustamante exhorts in an e-mail, "explore the building in all its decrepit glory before the renovations begin!"

The participating lineup is a kind of local who's who of the edgy side of the local arts scene: In addition to Oatman, Cooley and Bustamante, this includes William R. Bergman, Colleen Cox, Jan Galligan, **Sarah Gonek**, Allen Grindle, Chris Harvey, Mindy McDaniel, Lillian Mulero, Fernando David Orellana and Jack Zazlo. This will be an interesting addition to the latest First Friday event.

"We just completed some roof work, thanks to a small grant from the city," says GSCA board member Tom McPheeters.



C.Ryder Cooley, Jeff Root and Emily Collins

He's referring to an \$8,000 grant from the Albany Community Development Agency, which made it possible to repair the damaged dormers on the south side of the roof. While more repairs are definitely needed, McPheeters chuckles, "we're hoping this will keep us dry." GSCA, McPheeters says, also recently received a \$50,000 grant from New York state. This grant, made possible by Assemblyman Jack McEneny (D-Albany), will allow the bidding process to proceed for infrastructure repairs. The main thing now, he says, is to get the plumbing fixed, bathrooms installed and get the electrical service "to where it needs to be."

While the process of designing the most effective heating system for the structure is also still in progress, GSCA has involved the local community in some noteworthy accomplishments: Cohoes Design Glass Associates repaired three stained-glass windows for free, while volunteers repainted the sanctuary's ceiling, demolished the basement ceiling and restored the church's historic bell for full use.

And then, he adds, "the rest of it is fund-raising, fund-raising, fund-raising."

GSCA—formerly Mansion Community Arts—has come a long way since former neighborhood activist Gabrielle Becker first proposed trying to save St. Anthony's in 2003. The group has forged partnerships with Albany Mayor Jerry Jennings and the city of Albany, the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and numerous other organizations. This includes, strangely enough, the band Pearl Jam, who last year selected GSCA to receive a portion of the ticket sales from their 2006 Albany concert—the tidy sum of \$13,000, which was administered through the Vitalogy Foundation.

Although GSCA certainly hasn't gone wanting, "grants," McPheeters says, "are not all that easy to access."

In 2006, according to their “Plan for 2007,” GSCA raised “\$26,689 in grants and contributions to support to support our program activities and building rehab projects,” including that money from Pearl Jam.

Part of the issue is having to use space in the Howe branch of the Albany Public Library; transforming St. Anthony’s into a functional arts center, it seems, will be a great help in applying for funds. While restoring the church is an “all-consuming project,” McPheeters notes, the arts and community-directed programming *must* continue

“Youth Organics [Yo!, an urban-garden program] is booming. . . . It will double in size this year.

We should have around 20 kids doing urban gardening this summer,” McPheeters explains.

GSCA is now a part of an AmeriCorps program that employs Youth Organics “coordinator” Jess

Oppenheimer, and “a new position to support activities” run out of the Howe Library. These include, according to their plan, “break-dance classes, theater workshops and a self-help group for young women.”

“I’ve been living in this community for almost 10 years,” Collins says. She was briefly involved as a board member at the very beginning of Grand Street Community Arts, but “didn’t have the time” then to continue. Collins says she is very happy to again be a part of this effort to revitalize a neighborhood treasure.

It’s what “community” is all about.

*Vestuary Operatics will open at 5 PM tomorrow (Friday, June 1) at St. Anthony’s Church (Grand Street and Madison Avenue, Albany) as part of the monthly 1st Friday art event; the performances will begin at 8:30 PM. There will be additional showings—but without the performances—on Saturday and Sunday (June 2-3) from noon to 5 PM. For more info, visit [www.gscarts.org/operatics](http://www.gscarts.org/operatics).*



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