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By James Barron

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At the old Met



1902 Irving Underhill, N.Y.

A plaque will be unveiled next Wednesday to commemorate a long-gone building, the old Metropolitan Opera House on Broadway between West 39th Street and West 40th Street. One of the people who will pull back a gold lamé curtain for the unveiling is Nancy Zeckendorf, who remembers the old Met. She was a dancer in the Met's ballet corps in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The plaque will mention [Sir Rudolf Bing](#), who was the Met's autocratic general manager for 22 years and is credited with moving the Met into the modern era and out of the old building in 1966 when the Met's new quarters at Lincoln Center were ready.

Zeckendorf's new memoir — [“small town Big Dreams,”](#) written with Jane Scovell — also mentions Bing. And Chapter 14 mentions something that the plaque does not: her affair with Bing.

“That has nothing to do with the plaque on the building,” she said in an interview this week. And later, when she was asked how she and Bing became involved, she seemed not to want to dwell on the relationship.

This was after she had talked about discretion, or discreetness. “Somebody else might have taken the opportunity to flaunt the relationship and talk about it, but we didn't,” she said. “Seven years is a long time for a relationship. A lot of marriages don't even last that long.”

She said she had written about Bing in her memoir because the often acerbic Bing is not always remembered for his contributions to the Met, which included bringing in new directors “from theater and cinema to upgrade the dramatic potential,” she wrote in the memoir. She also wrote that he was “forward-thinking when it came to casting,” hiring Marian Anderson in 1955 (after hiring Leontyne Price two years earlier; [the Met had hired the Black prima ballerina Janet Collins](#) two years before that, for a scene in “Aida”).

The plaque says the old Met’s acoustics were exceptional, but the backstage facilities were overstuffed long before Lincoln Center was on the drawing board. Still, Zeckendorf, who later met and married the real estate developer William Zeckendorf Jr., said she missed the old building.

“Everybody came out and went in the same stage door — the stagehands and Renata Tebaldi,” she said, referring to a legendary soprano. “I would see her and she would say ‘Good morning, Nancy.’ Singers were not flying from one city to the other doing a different opera three days later. Not in those days. They stayed in one place longer, which I think was better for their voices as well.”