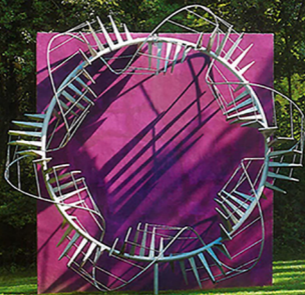


VISITING A LONG-AGO GARDEN
CHRIS WEDGE'S ANIMATIONS

AN ARTIST'S HEALING TOUCH
INTERFAITH EFFORTS IN BEDFORD

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FROM BROADWAY TO WACCABUC

behind the scenes

BY JENNIFER MOORE STANLEBRANTZ // PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHILLIP ENNIS

STAGE RIGHT This sweeping staircase leads down to the heart of the home. Opposite: Fran Weisler stands in a gallery of posters from all the couple's Broadway shows. Barry designed the metal water feature in the courtyard. The formal gardens were designed by James Doyle.



W

E CHOSE TO MOVE OUT HERE to get rid of the tension of New York City—which I adore, by the way,” recalls Fran Weisler, of the weekend home she shares in Waccabuc with her husband and business partner, Barry. “When I met Barry, I was 37, and he was 26, and I had two kids. I mean, how it happened was amazing,” she says of the genesis of her enduring 49-year marriage. “And that wasn’t now when they have whatever they’re called—women cougars—no one back then had heard of it.”

“Barry told me his dream was to be on Broadway. I remember going to my father and saying, ‘I think I’m in love with this guy—there’s something about him. He’s funny, he’s interesting. But he’s very young, he’s too short, and he wants to be in theater, and I know nothing about theater.’ My father said, ‘You know, most people meet someone, and they care about them, and if they’re lucky, the feeling lasts about two years. Go for the two years.’ And, I did, and it’s 49 years later!”

The story of the award-winning Broadway producers’ meeting is well documented—single mother fills in for a friend at a community theater box office. Young producer offers her a job. They fall in love. Together, they build a national touring stage company that produces Shakespeare, Shaw and Sophocles in Catholic schools from New York to Chicago. And, low and behold, after 18 years of schlepping U-Hauls and station wagons filled with props and actors, they arrive on Broadway, cast superstars James Earl Jones and Christopher Plummer in *Obello*, and win their first of seven Tony Awards.



HOME THEATER Clockwise from top left: Great-grandson Liam climbs the steps in the amphitheater designed by James Doyle; Peter Coffin's *Spiral Staircase*; Chakais Becker's *Time* sculpture stands on the lawn. Family fun in the reflecting pool featuring Hanneke Beaumont's *Bronze #66*. Opposite: Kevin Towle's forest garden includes a fieldstone path, with organic works of art.

The Weisslers have produced over 30 shows since their Broadway debut in 1982, including new hits like *Waitress* and *Finding Neverland*, plus vintage favorites like *Grease* and the longest running Broadway show in American history, *Chicago*. Bringing *Chicago* back to the Great White Way played a significant role in the Weisslers' move to Waccabuc. "Chicago was a milestone for us," Fran explains. "It was a revival of a show that failed. We redid it and believed in it, and nobody else did. Because of that, it was hard to raise money, so most of the money invested was ours. And, of course, 20 years later, you see this house? *Chicago* built it."

It was Barry's idea to buy a weekend home. Fran's stipulation was that the commute not include tunnels and bridges, so they quickly zeroed in on a 22-acre Waccabuc property that offered plenty of opportunities for exploring the land and enough bedrooms to house their children grandchildren and friends.

Down a country road not far from Mead Chapel and beyond some wooden gates is a covered walkway that leads between the main house and guest house to a courtyard showcasing a sparkling water sculpture design by Barry. On a beautiful spring day, Fran emerges from the French doors wearing a flowing caftan and big smile. Her house is filled with laughter, as her visiting family members are busy preparing lunch with the family chef.

Fran heads first to the living room past an enormous candy-filled vase and offers a handful as she begins the house tour.





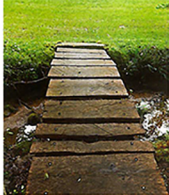
THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT
Fran enjoys family time with daughter Cindy, granddaughter Daryn, and great-grandson Liam. The dining room table is set for dinner with close friends and show-business colleagues, Christopher Plummer, James Earl Jones, and their wives. Opposite: Reub Karol's 1922 wooden sculpture, *Vacation*, frolics under the piano in the living room.



When she hired designer Richard Keith Langham years ago, she asked him for a comfortably elegant decor that would compel her guests to take a seat and stay awhile. Langham clearly listened, setting a grand piano in the center while blending sumptuous seating and intriguing art all around. A passageway to the right features a gallery of promotional posters for all the Weisler's shows on one side and a photographic homage to Chicago's first cast direct opposite. "These ladies made this house possible," she says sincerely. A media room, where family movie nights are a tradition, is tucked around the corner next to Barry's office.

Fran's office is at the opposite end of the house, just off the kitchen. Next door, the table in the dining room is being set for dinner with fresh flowers from the cutting garden. Linen napkins have been carefully inserted into enormous "diamond rings," and crystal goblets and sterling flatware are sparkling in the afternoon sun. A few hours later, James Earl Jones and Christopher Plummer will arrive for dinner with their wives—not your typical family movie night.

The most popular room in the house is the screened porch that overlooks the gardens—and what gardens they are. Barry hired James Doyle, of Doyle Herman Design Associates in Greenwich, soon after they moved in. "My husband was a thousand percent involved with James whose work is magnificent." Doyle redesigned the swimming pool and added formal gardens, a tennis court, and reflecting pool, one of Fran's favorite outdoor destinations. "I like sitting on a bench here," she



INTO THE WOODS

Black locust rounds lead the way into the forest garden, home to winterberry, spice bush, dogwood, native ferns, and red maples. A bridge of red oak planks crosses the stream. Lunch on the screened porch overlooking the pool and formal gardens.

says. "If I'm working on a new show, I can think about who I want in the company, or if I have any problems in my life, I can come here and think about it." Barry also asked Doyle to add the amphitheater where Marvin Hamliach once conducted the New York Philharmonic. "It was extraordinary. We had 130 in the seats and another 40 on blankets," recalls Fran.

Then, Barry hired Kevin Towle to design a forest garden. It started with a request for a footpath and ended up becoming one of the children's favorite places, thanks to the tree house, black locust stepping stones, playful sculptures, and sitting platforms, all under a canopy of trees.

The outdoor art that punctuates the gardens is another of Barry's passions. And, he is not timid in his selections. From Hanneke Beaumont's *Bronze #66* in the reflecting pool to Chakia Booker's tire sculptures and Peter Coffin's *Spiral staircase* wall, both on the lawn, the installations make bold-and frankly fun-statements.

"Barry is more magnetic, intense, and strong, while I'm extremely calm. I make him calmer, and he makes me jazzier," Fran says with a smile. "After 48 years, I'd rather be alone with him than anyone else," she adds. "And he's the same. We're still in love. It's just rare when two people have what we have together." ■