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When rehearsals go underground

By JUSTIN R. SILVERMAN

If laughter is truly more valuable than gold, then the massive underground bank vaults at 14 Wall St. have never held a more precious commodity.

Since January, the empty vaults have been serving as rehearsal space for live theater productions, musical groups, writers and multimedia performers — all of whom find themselves plying their art in a neighborhood far more famous for commerce than culture.

"I didn't even notice the artists working in the building until one day I saw a guy in a leotard walking through the lobby," says Daniel Ghadamian, a partner at Capstone Equities, which purchased the landmark building last year.

While renovating and leasing the 37 above-ground floors, Capstone agreed to donate the vault space on a month-by-month basis to the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Swing Space program. The LMCC then offered the free rehearsal space to local artists, who have found themselves working in vast windowless tombs designed more for the security of currency than the comfort of creative souls.

"The air is incredibly dry in here because they were protecting money," says Jay Scheib, who is directing a cast of nine actors in a play known as "Untitled Mars (This Title May Change)."



Jay Scheib (seated, lower left) and the cast of "Untitled Mars" rehearse below 14 Wall St.

"But finding a rehearsal space of this large size in the city on the budget of a small arts organization is [virtually] impossible."

"It's actually kinda perfect to rehearse in a vault, because the play takes place inside a spaceship," says Karl Allen, an actor who is playing one of the Martians. "It's also nice being an artist in this neighborhood, because I feel like I stand out here the way a suit would stand out in the East Village."

While one can hear the rumble of subway trains going by in adjacent tunnels, the sense of being inside the vaults is one of complete security, as if the city above could be swept away without harming the thespians performing below.

The vault at 14 Wall is one of five downtown Swing Spaces currently on

loan to the LMCC. Others include the 29th floor of the Equitable Building and basement offices at 1 Chase Manhattan Plaza.

But 14 Wall is the only space protected by 4-foot-thick reinforced steel doors. Those doors are currently prevented from closing by the height of the raised floor tiles around them.

"There is a key to lower the floors so that you can close the vault doors," says Ghadamian, "but we don't know where the key is. That's probably a good thing, otherwise people might be locking themselves in."

Members of the public wishing to descend into the vaults can do so today at 7:30 p.m. when one of the artists hosts an open rehearsal. E-mail bkerrick@lmcc.net for reservations.

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