

## Brooklyn Discovery

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### **Elysium between two Continents Celebrates its 35th Year** by Nino Pantano, October 23, 2018

On the evening of Wednesday, October 10th, *Elysium between two Continents* celebrated its 35th Year at the NY Lotos Club. According to the program notes included, “Elysium – between two continents fosters artistic and academic dialogue and mutual friendship between the United States of America and Europe. Elysium fights against ignorance, discrimination, racism, hatred, and anti-Semitism by means of art.”

“Elysium was founded on October 11, 1983, by Gregorij H. von Leitis as a theater company in New York and presented numerous American premieres of German language plays in English translation. Theater and the arts were used for the integration of the socially marginalized groups: Gregorij von Leitis worked with the children of Puerto-Rican immigrants in the East Village and initiated the program *Theater for the Homeless*. In 1993, the Elysium Theater Company was transformed into the trans-Atlantic cultural exchange organization, Elysium – between two continents. Over the past few decades, the focus has been on the rediscovery and presentation of music and literature created by artists who were persecuted by the Nazis. Elysium’s theme and banner is ‘Hate is a failure of the imagination.’”

“Elysium’s history is closely linked with Erwin Piscator and his groundbreaking ideas of a politically and socially relevant theater. Erwin Piscator believed that “art only achieves its purpose when it contributes to the improvement of man.” In 1985, Gregorij von Leitis founded *The Erwin Piscator Award Society* to honor and commemorate the artistic and humanitarian legacy of the great theater man Erwin Piscator and his lasting influence on theater on both sides of the Atlantic.

*The Lahr von Leitis Academy & Archive* in association with Elysium presents ‘Art and Education without Borders.’ Their belief is that education and art can empower and enlighten the younger generation through free lectures, seminars, workshops, and master classes. They want to familiarize young people with the treasures of exiled art to help them create a meaningful future that incorporates the lessons learned from history.”

The program began with an introduction by Michael Lahr, Program Director and Treasurer. He proudly hailed the many accomplishments and the sense of all good things that have progressed in the 35-year history of this noble dream of Gregorij von Leitis, founding Artistic Director and President.

The first speaker was Dr. Helmut Boeck, the Consul General of Austria who spoke of the art and idealism pursued by Elysium’s founders and supporters.



Gregorij von Leitis, Austrian Consul General Dr. Helmut Boeck & wife Barbara Boehm-Boeck & Dr. Michael Haider, new Director of the Austrian Cultural Forum.  
Photo by Letizia Mariotti

The next speaker was Jens Janik, Deputy Consul General of The Federal Republic of Germany who had high praise for Elysium and its words and deeds and unshakable idealism during these current challenging times.



Michael Lahr, Jens Janik, Deputy Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany & Gregorij von Leitis.  
Photo by Letizia Mariotti

Corey Friedlander, who handles public relations for Elysium, spoke with zeal about the presence and prescience of Elysium and how needed it is today. I am not a theologian but “blessed are the peacemakers for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” seems appropriate.



Corey Friedlander, Public Relations.  
Photo by Letizia Mariotti

The radiant and always vital Jolana Blau, Vice President of Elysium and Gregorij von Leitis, Founder and President, gave a touching thank you to all. Their affection and respect were presented with warmth and love in the finest sense of the word. A recent Erwin Piscator awardee, Jolana Blau, is a

concentration camp survivor who is a symbol of betterness replacing bitterness. Her sparkling smile is like the warming sun and a new dawn for a weary world.



Elysium's supporter Katherine Goldsmith & Jolana Blau.  
Photo by Letizia Mariotti

The playwright David Hirson, the baritone Peter Clark, who has worked with Elysium in the past (he sang one of the parts in Gregorij's production of Ernst Krenek's opera "What Price Confidence?" at the Rome Opera House, and also was part of the world premiere of Egon Lustgarten's opera as a work-in-progress at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, also directed by Gregorij). Peter lives in Brooklyn.



Playwright David Hirson, baritone Peter Clark & Elysium's Michael Lahr with Corey Friedlander in the background.  
Photo by Letizia Mariotti

The reception gave us the pleasure of speaking to the honorees and friends. Michael Lahr and Gregorij von Leitis just returned from several months in Europe presenting through Elysium programs, many lectures, and creative and hopeful plays.



Grazina Michneviute, Cultural Attache at the Consulate General of the Republic of Lithuania in New York, Michael Lahr & Gitana Skripkaite, Acting Consul General of Lithuania in New York.  
Photo by Letizia Mariotti

It was nice to see tenor and humanitarian Cesare Santeramo, always elegant, witty and charming. We wish his partner, Dr. Robert Campbell, well and missed his presence. Both were honored by Elysium at the Lotos Club a few years ago.



Elysium Supporter Cesare Santeramo and Gregorij von Leitis. Photo by Letizia Mariotti

We greeted the gifted photographer Letizia Mariotti and discussed the talent of famed Corsican tenor Tino Rossi who, next to Napoleon Bonaparte, is a legend from Corsica. Just Google his recording of “Un violon dans la nuit” or his hit “Vieni, vieni.” Letizia has a family link to Napoleon.

We chatted with young Italian-American Gary Guarinello whose family is from Campagna and Palermo, Italy and who expressed an interest in seeing his first opera. My wife Judy and I suggested Verdi’s *Aida* or Puccini’s *La Bohème* or Franco Zeffirelli’s spectacular *Turandot* at the Metropolitan Opera. We spoke to newlywed coloratura soprano JeanMarie Garofolo and husband Helder De Sa (of Portuguese descent) who are on the threshold to a happy musical and harmonious future. It was a pleasure to chat with Corey Friedlander who eloquently spoke earlier and does publicity for Elysium. I mentioned the “old” saints revered by my grandmother, particularly St. Anthony of Padua comparing them to our “new” saints – Michael Lahr, Gregorij von Leitis and Jolana Blau who have accomplished and continue to accomplish miraculous good deeds through Elysium the last 35 years, in today’s unsteady world.



Board member Oliver Trumbo, with Elysium’s supporters David Goldstein & Gail Reisin. Photo by Letizia Mariotti

The excellent wines and foods at the illustrious Lotos Club were worthy of this joyous celebration. Michael Lahr and Gregorji H. von Leitis deserve such acclaim. They are now SUNG heroes in my eyes, after 35 years of spectacular and newsworthy “happenings” with Elysium. We are truly blessed to applaud and share this wonderful event. In many an opera, “Esperanza” is what is taught. As long as we have Elysium we have HOPE in abundance.

We thank Program Director Michael Lahr, Founder Gregorij H. von Leitis and Vice President Jolana Blau. We wish you all at least CENT ANNI and continued great success!