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New York

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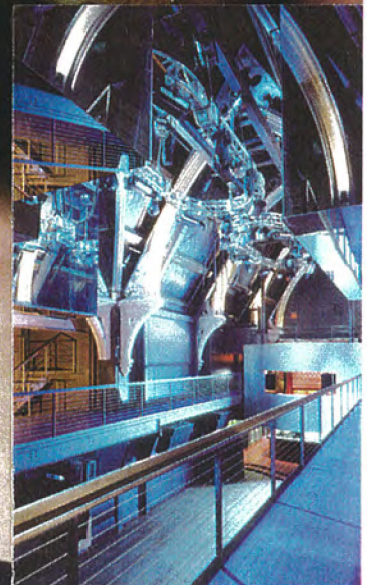
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The mists of Avalon

A new club moves into the former Limelight, hoping to drive away the dark clouds that hang over the infamous nightspot **By Bruce Tantum**

Avalon: The word conjures images of King Arthur, of elysian fields shrouded in mist, of Richard Burton hamming it up in a beloved Broadway musical, of Roxy Music's classy swan-song album. The word *Limelight*, on the other hand, makes many New Yorkers think of drugs, debauchery and gruesome death—clubland gone berserk.

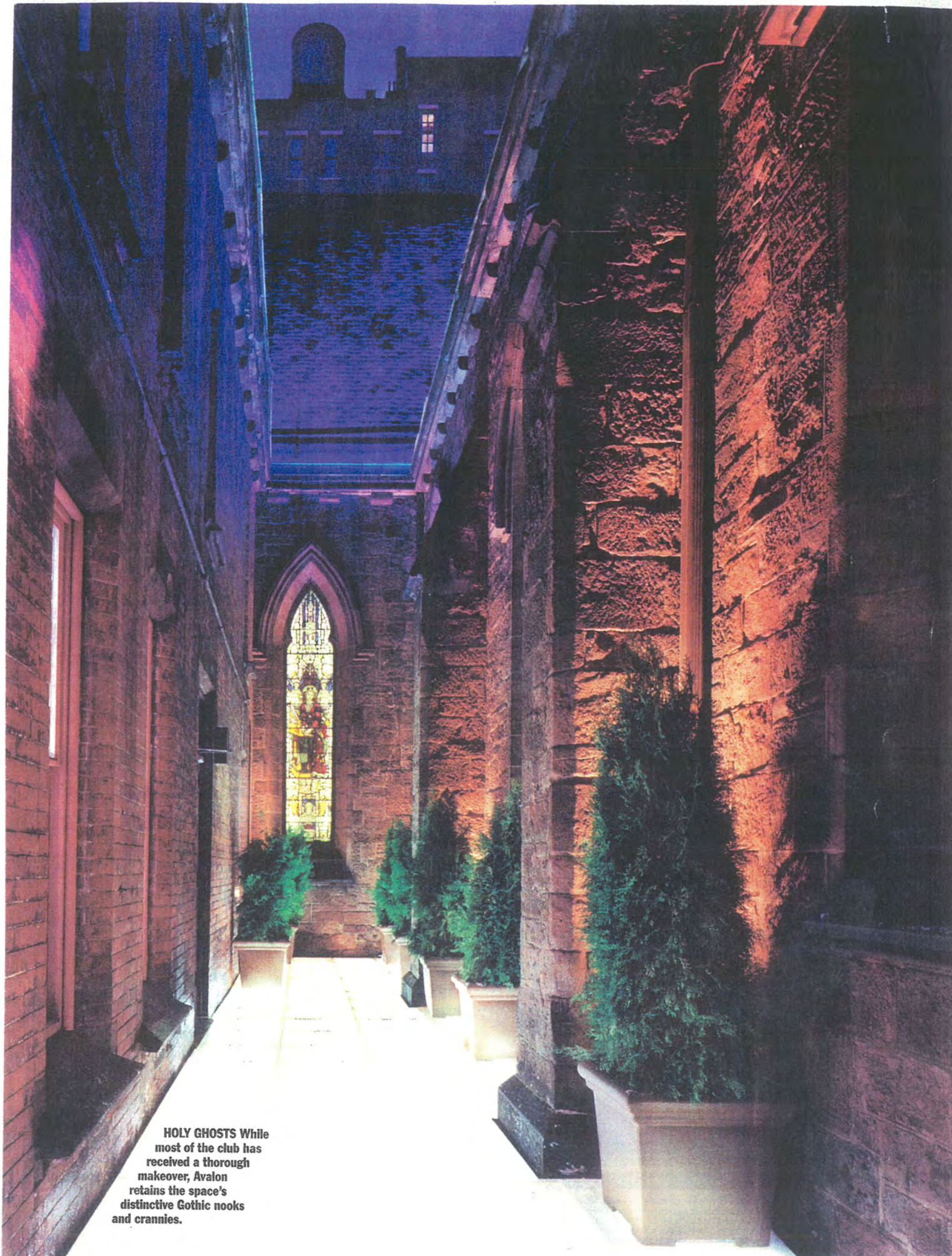
The two words will trip together off many tongues this week, when the ambitious entrepreneurs behind the long-running Boston superclub Avalon set up a Manhattan edition in Limelight's former home, the deconsecrated church that graces the corner of Sixth Avenue and 20th Street. The new venture is opening its doors on Saturday 20 in what Steven Adelman—who holds the lease with partner John Lyons—hopes will be a clean break from the labyrinthine space's storied, and occasionally sordid, past. (Adelman and Lyons opened a Los Angeles branch of Avalon, in the historic Palace theater, earlier this week.) While the events that made Limelight a symbol for all of clubland's evils during the mid-1990s (see "Heaven on earth," page 18) are far in the past, the associations remain, not least because of Frank Owens's recent chronicle of the era, *Clubland*, and the recent release of *Party Monster* (a docudrama about former Limelight promoter Michael Alig, who is currently serving time for a manslaughter charge).

"It's bad timing that *Party Monster* just came out," Adelman says dismissively. "We want to make Avalon a whole new experience. We're really excited about the beauty of the space, and even though the layout will be the same as Limelight, we're striving to redesign it as much as possible." (Adelman certainly knows about the *old* experience; he worked for former Limelight owner Peter Gatten from 1992 to '96, not only at Limelight but also at

the Gatten-owned Club USA and Tunnel.)

TONY visited Avalon two weeks before opening day, and Adelman isn't just blowing smoke about the club's makeover. Even though the 1,650-capacity space was still a work-in-progress—the sound of hammers and the smell of paint were everywhere—it was evident that there won't be much sense of familiarity for Limelight vets. Fans of the venue's inherent Gothness will be disappointed; unless you look up at the ceiling, you'll forget you're in a church. But all the necessary accoutrements of modern superclubbing are present. There's bright, candy-colored, retromodern styling created by David Ashen, who retooled Capitale and XL. The all-new, super sound system was created by Lyons, who is also a top audio designer. An elaborate light show (conceived by lighting guru Mark Brickman, who has masterminded the pin spots, lasers and whatnot for Blue Man Group and several Pink Floyd tours) is set to dazzle the main room's dancers. There are also four VIP areas for those wishing to dodge the hoi polloi, plus the luxurious Spider Club (formerly the Giger Room), an exclusive club-within-a-club complete with separate entrance. Happily, one of the space's main assets remains intact: the maze of nooks and crannies, which has long given partyers a delirious sense of disorientation.

Musically, Avalon will offer something for almost everyone, though the sounds look to be skewed toward the mainstream end of the spectrum. (Longtime NYC promoter Tom Mello is helping to book DJs for the club.) Initially, Avalon will be open just two nights a week: Fridays will feature house music (such esteemed spinners as Derrick Carter, Joeski & Onionz and Mark Farina are in the works); Saturdays will be programmed by trance master John Debo, a resident of the Boston Avalon, and big-time prog-houser Dave Ralph. The cur-



HOLY GHOSTS While most of the club has received a thorough makeover, Avalon retains the space's distinctive Gothic nooks and crannies.



BLUE STREAK David Ashen, who designed Capitale and XL, has given the old church a sleek, modern look.

rent notion is for the club to expand to five nights a week in October: Wednesdays will be devoted to good ol' rock & roll, while Thursdays will feature the party-time hip-hop of folks like Mark Ronson and Stretch Armstrong. And John Blair's boy parties will be ruling Sundays, just as they did at late incarnations of Limelight. The venue also plans to host live music in the future.

But no matter how fab the space looks or how bangin' the music sounds, the ghosts of parties past loom large. "Let me put things in perspective," Adelman says. "Everybody's focus is on the two years that gave Limelight a black eye, but the place was open for almost 20 years, and most of them were pretty glorious."

Indeed, until it was shut down by the city administration following a major police raid in 1996, Limelight was considered one of NYC's, and the world's, best dance clubs. "Limelight was like the Studio 54 of its day," recalls Claire O'Connor, who did public relations for the club from its opening in 1983 until 1992. "On opening day, the lines to get in stretched all the way down to 14th Street, and a lot of celebrities didn't get in." Yet it wasn't just popular; it was enormously influential. "In '91 and '92, Limelight was the epicenter of the rave scene in New York," says Tony Fletcher, the man behind that era's alt-rock-industrial-techno bash Communion. "At one point, you had four nights of techno, each with their own style. That wasn't being done anywhere else back then."

Even Alig's infamous Disco 2000 nights—at least until the dope-fueled insanity took over—were splendidly decadent fun, one of the last vestiges of a sort of debauched, circus-from-hell style of NYC nightlife that would be hard to re-create in today's sanitized after-dark world. Many clubbers of a certain age remember an utterly charming Alig wandering through Limelight with a bottle of Stol in one hand (and a vial of a less legal inebriant in the other), dispensing party favors and catty bons mots to friends and strangers alike. The revved-up ravey beats, the intentionally bad fashion sense, and the bizarre behavior and performances (occasional urine-drinking; a gal who famously pulled a lit-up string of Christmas lights out of her butt) only added to the Felliniesque fun. "It was really one of the last good parties of my generation, kind of like a final fashion parade," recalls Disco 2000 go-go gal Miss Andi, who could frequently be seen teetering in a cage high above the dance floor. "I guess it had to come to an end—although maybe not *that* end."

Still, for most people, it *was* the end. Limelight's two post-1996 incarnations met with failure; many nights were half full at best. The last incarnation, Estate@Limelight, stayed alive all of five months—and for much of that time, it was open only one night a week.

Many wonder if the bad-luck streak will be too much for Avalon to surmount. "The space does seem to have a curse on it," says longtime

Heaven on earth

Solemn worshipers and holy hell-raisers have formed the congregation at 660 Sixth Avenue

1844 Construction begins on the Church of the Holy Communion, a Gothic-style, Episcopalian house of worship designed by famed Trinity Church architect Richard Upjohn. The new building inhabits what was then the city's premier shopping district, dubbed Ladies' Mile (perhaps presaging the unholy number of drag queens who'd be passing through its doors a century and a half later). In its prime, the church counts John Jacob Astor and Cornelius Vanderbilt among its parishioners.

1966 The church is given landmark status, but soon falls on hard times and is deconsecrated in '72. In another bit of foreshadowing, the building is sold to a rehab center, Odyssey House, in the late '70s.

1974 Peter Gatien, a budding Canadian nightlife entrepreneur with \$290,000, one good eye and a dream, opens the first Limelight in Hollywood, Florida, followed by a branch in Atlanta five years later.

1983 Gatien buys the church from Odyssey House and, despite protests from the religious community, opens Limelight on November 9, 1983. The Andy Warhol-hosted opening party succeeds beyond Gatien's wildest expectations, with stars such as



STAR WATCH Peter Gatien gives Susan Sarandon the eye at a party in 1983, the year Limelight opened.

Jaclyn Smith, Cheryl Tiegs and Billy Idol in attendance.

1985 Ex-Studio 54 honcho Steve Rubell opens the Palladium, a much larger club that steals some of Limelight's thunder—and its clientele. The Palladium regularly offers free admission and open-bar events, and Limelight is forced to bring in outside promoters—a new concept in clubland—to help rope in the crowds.

1990 Club kid Michael Alig is hired as one of those outside promoters. His Wednesday freak show, the drug-and-techno-fueled Disco 2000, rules NYC's nightlife. Whereas Alig and characters with names like Richie Rich, Jennytalia, Sushi and Walt Paper were once barely noticed oddities skirting the edges of clubland, they soon find themselves sharing boob-tube time with Jerry Springer and Sally Jessy Raphael.

1996 Alig's kingdom crumbles when, in a narcotic haze, he and fellow club kid Freeze (real name: Robert Riggs) bludgeon drug dealer Angel Melendez to death, dismember his body and throw it into the Hudson River. "When all this happened," Alig told *TONY* in February '99, "we were on heroin and

scene maker (and former Disco 2000 MC) Larry Tee. "A former church with an address like 660 Sixth Avenue—how did it ever succeed?" But it's possible that bad vibes will be the least of Avalon's worries. Years of hostility from the city's administration, changing demographics and a sluggish economy have dealt a harsh blow to the club scene, which, despite the success of bridge-and-tunnel meccas like Sound Factory and Exit, leads many to question just how many superclubs NYC can support. "I'm not 100 percent sure that there are even enough cool people left here to fill that place up," says one veteran of clubland's salad days. Cool people or not, there's likely to be even more competition for clubbing dollars in the coming months: The long-promised Crobar and Spirit—which are even bigger than Avalon—are planning to open later this year. And considering Limelight's history, the Nightlife Task Force is likely to keep a close watch on Avalon. Patrons should think twice about bringing in even aspirin.

For his part, Adelman seems to harbor no doubts about the club's chances for success. "There's nothing like going into a room with a thousand people, with those lights, that sound and all that energy," he gushes. "I think New York really is waiting for a place like this. Besides," he adds, "we're betting millions on it!"

Avalon opens Saturday 20.



INNER SANCTUM
VIPs in private pods
can chill above the
main dance floor.



BUZZKILL *Party Monster*, starring Macaulay Culkin (right) as Limelight party promoter Michael Alig, depicts the murder of a club-going drug dealer.

[ketamine] and Rohypnol and cocaine. When Angel was knocked out on the floor, the thought that he was dead never really crossed our minds." Meanwhile, the police descend on Limelight in a massive drug raid; the club, called a "virtual drug supermarket" by the feds, is closed, and Gatien faces drug-dealing and conspiracy charges. He's also ordered to pay \$1.3 million in back taxes. Alig and Freeze are arrested and charged with murder; in '97, both plead guilty to manslaughter and receive sentences of 10 to 20 years. (Alig is eligible for parole in 2006.)

despite more opposition from the community board. Oddly, the new Estate@Limelight looks just like the old Limelight with the addition of some Sheetrock and a coat of paint. The opening is less than fabulous—the club is only half full—and most nights remain that way, though Blair's Sunday bash still packs 'em in. Limelight closes again in spring '03.

2003 Gatien and Alig are back in the news: In August, a judge orders Gatien to be deported due to those same tax problems, while *Party Monster*, a film chronicling

1998 Federal prosecutors suffer major embarrassment when Gatien is found not guilty of the drug charges. Gatien is now free to reopen Limelight, which, to the dismay of the city and the local community board, he does, on December 3. With the exception of John Blair's Sunday-night boy bashes, the club recaptures little of its former luster and closes again in '01.

2002 A group led by Blair buys Limelight. The space undergoes a multimillion-dollar renovation and reopens in November,

Alig's rise and fall, hits theaters. Reviews are less than stellar, but Macaulay Culkin sure does look like Alig. The church's lease is bought by Steve Adelman and John Lyons, and the space is rechristened Avalon. Will Avalon's reign at 660 last as long as Estate's or the Episcopalians'? Stay tuned....—BT



CHURCH IS IN SESSION Clubbers mob the floor during the venue's heyday in the '80s.