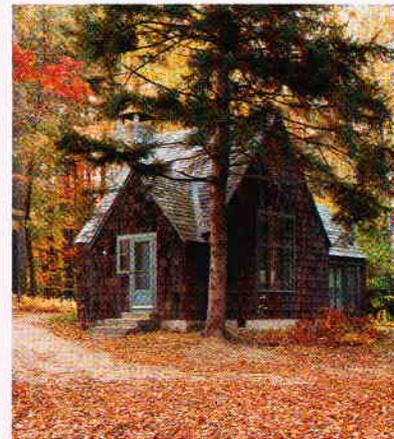


Clockwise from above: a MacDowell resident at work; the Omicron studio; past resident Leonard Bernstein; the Watson studio

## A cabin of one's own

New England's MacDowell Colony celebrates 100 years of artistic utopia. And the gay and lesbian artists who prospered there celebrate its role in their careers



**T**hough not founded or necessarily intended to cater to LGBT artists, the MacDowell Colony has a rich history of doing just that. The Peterborough, N.H., retreat center for creative types—along with New York's Yaddo, the most famous of its kind—celebrates 100 years of existence in 2007, and scores of queer residents, both past and present, are among those paying homage. (A documentary on the colony premieres at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City on May 2.)

"I can't overpraise them," says writer Sarah Schulman, who's now at MacDowell for the sixth time, working on the musical adaptation of her novel *Shimmer*. "In 1984, I published my first novel, and it was at a time when modern lesbian fiction was not published by any

mainstream publisher in this country, was not carried in mainstream bookstores, was not reviewed in mainstream magazines," she says. "I wouldn't have had a career if I hadn't gone there. They were able to see the quality of writing without being swayed in any way by the lesbian content.

"And as far as I know," she adds, "they were the only institution where that was true at the time."

Artist Doug Wright worked on both his Pulitzer Prize-winning play *I Am My Own Wife* and the current Broadway hit musical *Grey Gardens* at MacDowell. "They have all these little studios spread out across the beautiful New Hampshire woods," he recalls. "I was in a gorgeous little cabin, and every day they delivered my lunch and they delivered some fire-

wood. I'd make a little fire in my fireplace and I'd go to work.

"There was this quiet aura of industry about the place," Wright continues. "You never felt obligated to work, and yet you knew the time was so rare and the surroundings were so lush that you had better seize the moment and produce something. I found it an extraordinarily muse-friendly spot."

Filmmaker Ira Sachs, who worked on the screenplay for his new movie, *Married Life*, while at MacDowell, notes the influential ghosts of residents past. "You can't help thinking about it when you're in one of those studios," he remembers. "Thornton Wilder was there, Leonard Bernstein was there, and you're there. You're part of a great tradition."

The studios have a permanent record: "They have these

wonderful 'tombstones' on the wall, and everyone who has been in your studio or cabin previously inscribes them before leaving," says Wright, who owes "a real debt" to MacDowell. "You find [names] like Aaron Copland, these titanic figures from the history of American arts and letters. So if you're lacking inspiration, you just have to peruse the walls."

Or a pornographic DVD: "I think you should get everyone to describe how they masturbated while at MacDowell," says Sachs with a laugh, remembering that a steamy flick was once passed around. "I can promise you it's a primary part of the experience." —Michael Giltz

BERNSTEIN: RENEE PERRY / OTHER PHOTOS: VICTORIA SAMOVARIS (3)