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BIG CITY
Writer's 9/11 Experience, From Essays Into an Opera

By **SUSAN DOMINUS**
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People had plenty of painful reasons for leaving New York after Sept. 11, among them tragic memories and overwhelming fear.



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Wickham Boyle said her opera was "a theatrical retelling of one family's involvement in 9/11 and beyond."

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For those who never would have considered leaving, New Yorkers like Wickham Boyle were probably a big part of the reason. Ms. Boyle, who lives in TriBeCa, spent the third day following 9/11 spreading grace as best she could, buying up ash-covered flowers from a local grocer, washing them off in her shower to let their colors reemerge, and then placing the restored blooms at sites of wreckage.

Ms. Boyle, 58, a writer and a mother of two, was among those who never would have contemplated a home base anywhere else (although she's lived large chunks of her life almost everywhere else — Niger, Algiers, France and Italy, to start).

She started using a bicycle as her primary way of navigating the city 36 years ago and still does, in fair and foul weather. In 1977, she wrote a connoisseur's guide, "On the Streets: A Guide to New York City's Buskers." In 1976, the first year the New York marathon left Central Park and took its current course through the five boroughs, she finished among the top 30 women. And when the Department of Cultural Affairs decided, that same year, that the city was too broke to pay for an annual New Year's Eve celebration in Central Park, it was Ms. Boyle, then 26 and the department's director of special projects, who kept it going with a frenzy of last-minute fund-raising calls.

So dyslexic that she couldn't tell time until she was 30, Ms. Boyle nonetheless became a successful stockbroker in her 40s, when she needed the money. It wasn't just that she was a woman at that age that made her unusual for the job. "These guys would call me, screaming, 'Give me a quote!'" Ms. Boyle said. "And I'd say 'To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day, to the last syllable of recorded time.'" After a while, recalled Ms. Boyle, the clients came to like it. "Give me the girl who gives you the quote before she gives you the quote," they used to say if they got someone else on the phone.

Her children, unsurprisingly, became the consummate city kids. Ms. Boyle, who served as executive director at the experimental theater La MaMa for eight years, says her daughter, who is now

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23, saw 200 shows in the first year of her life. "People would say things like, 'Oh, the whirling dervishes are rehearsing in the annex — I'll take the baby,'" said Ms. Boyle, who let them.

She understood that to raise a child in New York accepts forgoing certain protections. When a child at her daughter's elementary public school tried to push her down a flight of stairs, Ms. Boyle didn't call the principal. "I told her, 'You need to find something that that boy can teach you,'" Ms. Boyle said. Her daughter did, and to this day she dribbles a basketball with great skill. Years later, when her son tried to get home a few days after John Kennedy Jr.'s plane went down, the crowds for the memorial in the neighborhood, where Mr. Kennedy had lived, were so thick that he had to wait for them to thin out to get to his own door.

Still, nothing prepared Ms. Boyle for the day she herded 12 high school students, including her son, back to her home amid a storm of smoke and rubble. Ms. Boyle's experience living downtown in the months after 9/11 became the guiding theme of a collection of essays she published in December 2001, "A Mother's Essays from Ground Zero." Last year, with the help of various artists she knew through her work in theater, she turned those essays into "Calling: An Opera of Forgiveness," which opens at La MaMa on Sept. 12. Ms. Boyle, nothing if not versatile, is the librettist, the director and the co-producer of the piece, which she describes as a "a theatrical retelling of one family's involvement in 9/11 and beyond."

Why an opera? "It wasn't going to be '9/11, The Musical,'" she said.

In addition to putting her story onstage, Ms. Boyle also offers a look behind the production (and into other aspects of her life) in her blog "Midlife Mambo."

Ms. Boyle's experience bears out the theory that the longer you live in New York, the smaller the town gets. When she went door to door asking shops on her street, North Moore Street, to post fliers for her opera, not a single one refused. Thirty-one local merchants from Cutco Knives to Bouley donated goods or services for a silent auction to raise money for the production (all told, it cost \$20,000). This Friday, Ms. Boyle will be reading from her essays at the TriBeCa Barnes & Noble, and performers from the opera will display the theatrical form those essays have taken.

In one essay, Ms. Boyle writes that TriBeCa, an anchor in her life, "has taken in my two babies, embraced me in my endless quest for the perfect career, and married me in its opulence." Among her many winning qualities is her refusal to complain about the changes that have turned her neighborhood from an empty corner to a destination for city swells.

"A lot of people say, 'Oh, TriBeCa is so changed,'" she said. "Have you looked in the mirror? Life goes on."

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