

Going Downtown

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(he/him/his)
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Consider the beginnings of Off-Off Broadway in New York City in the early 1960s. At places like Caffè Cino, Café La Mama, The Negro Ensemble Company, Theatre Genesis, Judson Poets' Theatre, and many others, the plays were written, designed, acted, and directed primarily by young people who lived downtown, mostly in the Village, East and West.

They were a community. Or, rather than that over-used word, they were a neighborhood. They saw each other every day on the street, in the bars and cafes, and, at night, in their homemade theaters in basements, lofts, churches—and those same bars and cafes. They didn't go to see a particular play, they went just to be at the theater, and it didn't matter what was on. They were likely to know everyone who was in whatever it was, as well as most everybody who was watching with them. Tomorrow it would be their turn to be on the stage for a similar audience of friends and neighbors. Anything was possible. John Guare wrote a play on a Thursday and it was performed at Theatre Genesis on the following Monday. Production values were nil; the premium was on imagination.

The visionaries who started these places—the Ellen Stewarts, Joe Cinos, Douglas Turner Wards, and Al Carmines's among them—weren't thinking about fame, agents, institutions, Boards of Trustees, pathways to television, or any of that; they certainly weren't thinking about profit or much of anything that was valued by the theaters north of 14th Street. They were in love with creativity and provided opportunities for their friends and neighbors to exercise it and to share it with the rest of the neighborhood. Some of it was overtly political; much of it was political simply because it was the authentic expression of the artists who created it.

Out of that neighborhood came many of the artists who, through their work and, in many cases their teaching, gave birth to the American theater we so value today, everyone from Guare and Lanford Wilson and María Irene Fornés, to Adrienne Kennedy, Sam Shepard, Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones in those days), Rochelle Owens, Ed Bullins, Megan Terry, Charles Ludlam, Rosalind Drexler, Charles Mee, Jr.—and those are just a handful of the playwrights, to say nothing of the actors and directors.

Many young artists coming into the profession now experience anxiety, depression, fear: of not getting an agent, not making the vital connections, not having a sufficiently robust social media presence; about paying the rent, about their prospects in a tough business that is likely to become only more difficult. Amidst all this worry about what it takes to be a professional artist, too often something is missing.

Talking to the pioneers of Off-Off Broadway and reading their accounts, it's clear that if they didn't have money or many other material resources, they did have one thing. They had joy: of creation, of being young, of believing that anything was possible as long as they were creating work for themselves and their neighbors. They had joy, too, in writing from their authentic

selves, the kinds of selves they didn't see on the commercial uptown stages: people of color, women straight and gay, gay men, young people of all stripes who just didn't find a place for themselves in their parents' culture. We're making strides in authenticity on our stages; can we hope to find the joy again? It may not be by putting all our hopes in entrenched institutions, expensive buildings, and annual galas. Can we find it by just getting together with our friends and putting on a play?

Frankly, I don't know, but there's one way to find out.