

OFF, OFF BEAT

FOR PECULIAR WORKS PROJECT'S VILLAGE THEATER TOUR, ALL NEW YORK'S A STAGES
By BARBARA HOFFMAN

IT'S a tour, it's a performance piece, it's... a slice of Village history. "OFF Stage: the West Village Fragments" is three, three things in one - and if you've been wondering what that bed's doing on a sidewalk near Sheridan Square, read on. Several times tonight (and other nights through Oct. 7), actors/tour guides will lead a two-hour trek through the West Village—pausing along the way to watch snippets of plays by Sam Shepard, Lanford Wilson, Gertrude Stein and others—at the off-off-Broadway sites where they premiered back in the '50s and '60s.



SCENE: Zak Wilson delivers a snippet from "Goodnight, I Love You" in a doorway off Bedford Street. About best friends, a straight woman and a gay man, who talk each other to sleep nightly and commiserate about men. The play paved the way for the now ubiquitous gay-best-friend-to-cute-single-girl role best exemplified by Eric McCormack's Will in "Will and Grace." Playwright William M. Hoffman went onto fame as author of '80s AIDS play "As Is."

Sadly, a lot of those theaters aren't there anymore—which is why, says Catherine Porter of the aptly named Peculiar Works Project, she and her partners decided to stage this particular peculiar work.

"We kept seeing all the downtown theaters being torn down," she says. "The Circle in the Square is now condos... the Sullivan Street Playhouse, where 'The Fantasticks' played all those years, condos. The Perry Street Theater and Variety Arts—closed, closed.

"We figured, we have to do something to remind people what this area of town has meant to theater—not just in this city, but around the world."

The historic ramble kicks off at Sixth Avenue and West Ninth Street—on the traffic island across from Jefferson Market Garden—and progresses on to the Women's House of Detention (Sixth Avenue at West Eighth Street) before wending its way, eight stops and performances later, to Judson Memorial Church (55 Washington Square South) for a final excerpt and a reception.

Since the original stages no longer exist, props are often been set up on sidewalks or other public areas. Hence the bed near Sheridan Square, where actors perform a scene from Robert Heide's "The Bed," about two men the morning after.

Porter says she and her co-artistic directors, Ralph Lewis and Barry Rowell, initially hoped to cover the entire Village—West and East, the latter being the land of La MaMa and Theater Genesis - before conceding that "that might be a little far to ask people to walk."

As it is, she says, theater tour-goers should wear comfortable shoes and dress for variable fall weather. (In case of rain, the show's a no-go.)

This isn't the first Peculiar Work ever staged. Six years ago, Porter and company heard that the building behind the Judson Memorial Church, on Tompson and West Third streets, was

being torn down to make way for more of NYU's law school. That building had been home for years to performance artists, dancers and even social workers, so Peculiar Works decided to honor it with a themed tour, complete with re-enacted performances and tour guides who doubled as actors.

Christopher Hurt was one of them. Wearing a pencil protector and waving a flashlight—"I played the part of a man who was going to tear down the building"—Hurt led the curious out of windows and onto fire escapes while he nattered on about asbestos removal.

For this new project, he'll perform a scene from Maria Irene Fornes' comedy "The Successful Life of 3" at the place it was first performed - the Sheridan Square Playhouse, now the patio of Garage restaurant. Should you happen to be dining there some nights between 7 and 10 p.m., you'll find him at a table with two other actors, who'll be talking and peeling potatoes.

"We can't throw anything around, because we're not allowed to hit the people at the adjoining tables," says Hurt, who plays what he calls "the toad in the bed between the couple," aka "the traditional third wheel." "Who knows?" he adds. "Maybe they'll get a free scene for dessert or something."

Thursday night's first multivenue, indoor/outdoor performance went pretty smoothly, Porter reports—except for a little incident on Christopher Street, where someone threw a piece of fruit at an actor doing the Kenneth Brown play "The Brig." At least, "I don't think it was a critical comment," Porter says, laughing. "Maybe just someone being goofy."



SCENE: Maggie Steele and Gillian Goll in "The Rue Garden," in front of the Greenwich House Music School. Claris Nelson's play is about two women living in seclusion, who have to deal with a sprightly young thing who enters their garden.



SCENE: Tom Johnson and Catherine Porter in "Home Movies" on MacDougal Street, where the Provincetown Playhouse stood. Rosalyn Drexler's Obie-winning spoof had music by late Judson Memorial Church stalwart the Rev. Al Carmines. He originated the role of Father Shenanigans.

The two-hour tours run tonight, tomorrow (the only Sunday performance) and Thursdays through Saturdays through Oct. 7. Tours begin at 7, 7:30 and 8 p.m.; groups are limited to a dozen people, who'll get IDs that will admit them to the closing reception. Tickets cost \$15 (\$10 for students and seniors) and are available through TheaterMania at (212) 352-3101 or theatermania.com.