

## OFF Stage: the East Village Fragments

Peculiar Works Project, East Village, New York City

Production ★★★★★

Performance ★★★

Culture mavens, take note: There is only a limited time to catch what may be the most unique theatrical offering of the summer. This epic tour of the talents who shaped Off-Off Broadway literally takes audiences through the alleyways and haunts of downtown's collective memory.

This very *OFF Stage* performance, subtitled *East Village Fragments*, is far from a leisurely stroll down memory lane, however; it is very much of the moment. While performances highlight the area's rich history, the street life surrounding them adds a sense of immediacy. In a neighborhood known for local color, this can be volatile. The producing company, Peculiar Works Project, often mines site-specific pieces that combine the staged with the spontaneous, and here the company has struck theatrical gold.

Great care was taken in assembling the planned portion. The tour covers cultural landmarks of the theatrical vanguard, with selections from plays that made the venues famous. Featured writers range from well known names like Sam Shepard, Israel Horovitz and Murray Mednick, to more obscure figures like Diane di Prima from New York Poets' Theatre, or Allan Kaprow, who offered one of the City's first 'happenings.'

Audiences have a chance to see history in motion, while immersing themselves in the sights and sounds of the central character – the Lower East Side. It seems the neighborhood has not lost its verve. As we followed two actors from *Birdbath* arguing their way down the street, as if on cue, some passersby started a quarrel that was mistaken at first for part of the scene. Actresses reciting lines from Phoebe Wray's feminist piece, *The Mulberry Bush*, were drowned out by a man shouting into his cell phone that he was watching a nun do stand-up comedy (eliciting chuckles from the crowd). Not all reactions were whimsical. While *The Indian Wants the Bronx* may remind some of New York's bad old days (not to mention Al Pacino's star turn), the theme of racism is still pertinent – as was evident when a passing drunk heckled the actor wearing a turban.

To a large extent, the plays still resonate in today's world. One standout performance was from the Broadway hit, *Hair*, which started at the Public Theater. Director Robert Bartley resisted any tie-dyed sentimentality, and instead drew on a youthful cast for a contemporary spin. The songs, which featured a soldier (a gifted Joey Auzenne) and anti-war demonstrators, could easily have been inspired by current headlines. It was one of the more intricate pieces (as choreographed by Laura Sheehy), and the ensemble work was superb. Joe Papp would have been proud. *Viet Rock* also dealt with war; three actors commandeered the stage in a display of physical virtuosity that was punctuated by sentiments familiar to soldiers everywhere. Similarly, Robert Heide's 1966 play, *Why Tuesday Never Has A Blue Monday*, still has much to say about the mental health system. (Michael Jay Henry and Michelle Beshaw gave a gutsy performance.)

Other directors offered new insights into old favorites. Jon Michael Murphy created a hip hop staging of William M. Hoffman's *XXXXX*, while the watershed play of the sixties anti-war movement, *America Hurrah*, was perfect for the hurly-burly of the street. We especially liked *Girl at the Party*; her tale of a car accident was particularly poignant amidst passing traffic and pedestrians. And what better place to experience Tom Eyan's outrageous *Why Hanna's Skirt Won't Stay Down* (kudos to Nick Matthews and Catherine Porter) than a street corner on a steamy summer night?



Shoshanna Richman and Joey Auzenne perform in an excerpt from "Hair." Photo/Jim Baldassare

In terms of staging, one of our favorites was *Camera Obscura*, whimsically played by Richard Sheinmel and Debbie Troché. In director Tim Cusack's hands, Robert Patrick's fanciful satire of technology's impact on communication was as relevant as the next cell phone call. We think Jean Genet would have approved of the claustrophobic view of *The Maids*, which featured Stephanye Dussud and an exhilarating Jenny Lee Mitchell. An intimate staging of Michael Locascio's bedroom scene from *A Corner of a Morning* was also remarkable; Liche Ariza and Jennifer Whitman performed from a mattress in the street. And director Halina Ujda made full use of the Bowery's gritty byways as backdrops to Ruth Landschoff Yorck's tale of crime and punishment, *Lullaby for a Dying Man*. Explosive performances by Christopher Beier and Frank Blocker took full advantage of nearby fences and stoops.

With such a range, expect to be challenged – and we don't just mean wear comfortable shoes (the show runs approximately two hours). The diverse offerings prompted various reactions, but the end effect was compelling. Special mention should go to Tara Hill, who coordinated costumes that often added dramatic flair, and not least to Production Coordinator, Susan Lange, who took on the Herculean task of pulling together the talents of 80 actors, 22 directors and scores of volunteers.

We commend the Producers (and company co-founders) – Ralph Lewis, Barry Rowell, and Catherine Porter – for putting on such a monumental labor of love. The ultimate goal of this show, as well as its predecessor (a similar revue in Greenwich Village) is to persuade the City to permanently memorialize these historic locations. For us, bringing these stories to life may be the best tribute of all. Tickets: 212-352-3101.



Jacqueline Gregg in *OFF Stage: the East Village Fragments*.  
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