

OFF Stage: the East Village Fragments

by Pete Boisvert

Peculiar Works' *OFF Stage: the East Village Fragments* is a fascinating look at the beginnings of the off-off Broadway movement. The evening is a companion piece to the company's *West Village Fragments*, which ran to much acclaim last year. In this site-specific piece, the audience follows a series of pushcarts around the Village, where they are treated to 29 scenes from the early years of off-off Broadway.

The performance begins in Astor Place with a character named The Producer, in an homage to La MaMa founder Ellen Stewart, who explains that the most important thing in life is to have a pushcart, and to push it for others as well as yourself. After a brief monologue detailing Ms. Stewart's early years in New York prior to founding La MaMa, The Producer sets off with her pushcart to lead the audience downtown to the Public Theatre, where a number of anti-war activists are found collecting signatures and protesting. A soldier confronts the protestors, and in a moment a dozen or so of the folks milling about the area break out into a pair of musical numbers from Galt McDermot, Jim Rado and Gerome Ragni's counterculture musical *Hair*.

Following a variety of pushcarts from scene to scene, we are led on a winding tour through the East Village, stopping every half block or so for another performance. Many of these scenes are staged in front of the theatres they were originally performed in.

The individual scenes are sharply staged and well acted. Standout pieces include Leonard Melfi's *Birdbath*, concerning a young man escorting a woman to her subway station, wittily staged down the length of Stuyvesant Street; Robert Patrick's *Camera Obscura*, which features a young man and woman clad only in Saran wrap attempting a blind date by video while dealing with a 5 second delay; and Michael Locascio's *A Corner of a Morning*, literally staged on a mattress squeezed between two parked cars on the street.

The evening closes with the only indoor performance, at La MaMa ETC. A soldier with a guitar begins singing a song on the street, then leads us into the lobby of the building for the final piece, Megan Terry and Marianne de Pury's *Viet Rock*. The Producer from the beginning of the evening then reappears to recount the history of the theatre we're in, including two evictions, battles with the unions, and an attempt to arrest The Producer on trumped-up prostitution charges.

One of the most thrilling aspects of the evening is the anticipation of where the next scene will come from. I found myself studying passersby on the street, wondering if they would become part of the show next. The size of the audience fluctuated as we moved through the Village, with onlookers getting caught up in the public spectacle and tagging along with the group for a few scenes. During the performance of Tom Eyan's (*Why Hanna's Shirt Won't Stay Down*), three people using the ATM at the bank located directly behind the actors lined up in the window to gawk, becoming an unwitting backdrop to the scene.

The other thing I found truly remarkable about the evening is the grace with which one scene flows into another. Often the pushcart pulls away to bring the audience to the next performance while the actors from the previous scene are still speaking to each other. In other cases the new scene starts behind the audience or erupts spontaneously from actors planted in the audience.

With 80 actors and 22 directors staging 29 scenes over the course of two hours and 40 minutes, the production could easily have been bogged down by its own size. Peculiar Works does an amazing job of finding innovative ways to carry us from one piece to the next. *OFF Stages: the East Village Fragments* is a treasure trove for anyone with an interest in the roots of off-off Broadway.



Pictured: Liche Ariza and Jennifer Whitman in a scene from *OFF Stage: the East Village Fragments* (photo © Jim Baldassare)