

Where Off Off Took Off

By STEVEN McELROY



Phebe's, 359 Bowery, was called the Sardi's of Off Off Broadway.

Photo: Steven McElroy

Last fall, the theater company Peculiar Works Project took audiences back in time by way of a tour that meandered through Greenwich Village, stopping at Off Off Broadway's earliest locales. Along the way actors performed excerpts from seminal works of downtown theater. But the company was only telling half the story.

Now "OFF Stage: The East Village Fragments," which begins previews

on Thursday, will tell the rest of the tale. Eighty actors will enact scenes from plays that originated at La MaMa, Theater Genesis, the Tempo Theater and other performance spaces. The group hopes also to bring more permanent attention to the downtown theatrical legacy and is working to persuade the city to install plaques at the sites, said Catherine Porter, one of its three co-artistic directors.

"OFF Stage" runs Thursdays through Saturdays until June 30, with four tours nightly, at 7, 7:30, 8 and 8:30. Performances will be offered at the same times on opening night, Sunday, June 17. Tickets (\$18, or \$15 for students and 65+) are available through theatermania.com or by calling (212)352-3101. Preview tickets are \$15; \$10 for students and seniors. Here are some highlights of the tour.

1 ASTOR PLACE
The starting point is by the sculpture commonly referred to as the "Astor Place Cube," though it is actually "Alamo," a 15-foot steel sculpture created by Tony Rosenthal and installed in 1967.



2 THE PUBLIC THEATER
425 Lafayette Street
Joseph Papp started the Shakespeare Workshop in 1954 and began staging free productions at the Emmanuel Presbyterian Church. He took over this former home of the Astor Place Library in 1967 and mounted "Hair" as the inaugural production at the newly dubbed New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theater.



3 ASTOR PLACE THEATER
434 Lafayette Street
This 1831 Greek Revival-style building has housed a 299-seat theater since 1968. Israel Horowitz's "Indian Wants the Bronx," starring Al Pacino, was the first production. Blue Man Group has performed here since 1991.



11 LA MAMA E.T.C. ANNEX
66 East Fourth Street
La MaMa E.T.C. still stands, and Ellen Stewart still runs the company, though now it's more of an arts complex. The theater's main home since 1968 has been at 74A East Fourth Street.



10 PHEBE'S 359 Bowery
Some called it the Sardi's of Off Off Broadway. Robert Patrick's 1975 play "Kennedy's Children" is set at the bar.

9 THIRD STREET BETWEEN SECOND AVENUE AND BOWERY
The nearby Bouwerie Lane Theater was home to the Playhouse of the Ridiculous in 1967. John Vaccaro directed Charles Ludlam's "Conquest of the Universe" there, but the two clashed, and Ludlam was fired from his own production.

8 CAFÉ LA MAMA NO. 2 (former site)
82 Second Avenue
Ms. Stewart moved into an upstairs loft here after leaving Ninth Street and soon after changed the name to La MaMa Experimental Theater Club (E.T.C.). A dispute with the landlord necessitated another move the next year. After the final curtain here Ms. Stewart asked audience members to pick up their chairs and carry them to home No. 3, at 122 Second Avenue.

Photographs of Astor Place Cube, Astor Place Theater and Phebe's by Steven McElroy/The New York Times; Ellen Stewart by Alex Jeffrey



7 CAFÉ LA MAMA NO. 1 (former site)
321 East Ninth Street
Ellen Stewart's La MaMa has produced nearly 2,000 plays and fostered scores of writers, directors and actors since its inception in the tiny basement here in 1962. The first production at what was then called Cafe La MaMa was "One Arm," by Tennessee Williams. Neighbors accused Ms. Stewart of running a bordello, and the theater repeatedly failed fire inspections; it closed in April 1963.



Ellen Stewart in 1969

4 COOPER SQUARE
Between Third and Fourth Avenues, at East Seventh Street
Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane and others performed at the nearby Five Spot Jazz Club in the late 1950s, and the playwright and poet Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones), frequented the place. Mr. Baraka was one of the founders of the New York Poets Theater in 1961.

5 TEMPO THEATER (former site)
Four St. Marks Place
Julie Bovasso started a company here in 1955, presenting some of the first American productions of plays by Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco and other offbeat Europeans. Her 1956 performance as Solange in Genet's "Maids" won her an Obie award from The Village Voice, then a new publication.

6 THEATER GENESIS St. Marks Church
131 East 10 Street, at Second Avenue
In 1964 the director Ralph Cook founded Theater Genesis in this Episcopal church, which was consecrated in 1799. "Cowboys" and "Rock Garden," two one-acts by Sam Shepard, were the first productions, and lots of anarchistic theater followed, including works by Leonard Melfi, Adrienne Kennedy and Harry Koutoukas.