

A Theatrical Field Trip

Theatre

BY HELEN SHAW

While some outdoor theater takes to the parks, the Peculiar Works Project takes to the streets. Last year, the group's Obie Award-winning "West Village Fragments" fused a walking tour of the West Village with scenes from off-off Broadway's early classics. Now, the group casts its gaze eastward with "OFF Stage: The East Village Fragments," currently in session.

The 1960s East Village saw the development of some of theater's greatest talents, including onetime fixtures like the Off-Bowery Theatre, Theatre Genesis at St. Mark's Church, and Tambellini's Gate Theater — all of them showcased in "OFF Stage: The East Village Fragments." Some, like Sam Shepard and Israel Horowitz, became household names. Some, like Jean-Claude van Itallie, are familiar from history books. And some, like Anthony Barsha and Michael Locascio, have been unfairly (albeit temporarily) forgotten.

Artistic director Catherine Porter, having read about the scene while studying theater in Joplin, Missouri, wanted to pay homage to "the people, plays, and venues that have been such a neglected part of New York's history," she said. She and her partners first dreamt up the project in 2000, when New York University was tearing down Judson House, the parish hall of Judson Memorial Church that had once hosted the yet-to-be-known Claes Oldenburg, Maria Irene Fornes, and Yoko Ono. Peculiar Works made a site-specific work to celebrate the Judson House, and started to fantasize about a broader, Villagewide affair.

Much of "OFF Stage: The East Village Fragments" retains that the sense of elegy. "They tore down the Sullivan Street Theater for condos; the downtown Circle in the Square is condos; the Variety Arts Theater is condos," Ms. Porter said in an interview. "Of the great fixtures, only three buildings — La Mama E.T.C., Judson Church, and St. Mark's — are even still standing."

But while the physical landscape is full of ghosts, the plays themselves have survived. "It's surprisingly contemporary and unsentimental. It holds up," a director, David Vining, who this year directs Murray Mednick and Anthony Barsha's "The Hawk," said.

The practical challenges of a roving, outdoor production are enormous. Artistic directors Ms. Porter, Ralph Lewis, and Barry Rowell manage a team of 86 actors, 22 directors, and five stage managers, who effectively work as line producers. During the shows, they swarm across the East Village, keeping in contact with walkietalkies ("Cellphones cost minutes!" Ms. Porter thriftily explains), trying to herd the group, ward off hecklers, and politely interrupt the irritating rash of cell phone photography. As each night goes on, their jobs grow more taxing: Audiences tend to snowball, as curious people tag along for the tour, and even an ongoing performance isn't always enough to dislodge some park-sitters from their chosen bench.

Because it operates under the rules of Equity Showcase Theater, a theatrical training facility, the production has also faced one unforeseen challenge: It must have bathrooms available for its actors at all times. To that end, Ms. Porter has been beating the pavements for a year, striking up friendships with local business owners, and the route has been plotted from available restroom to available restroom. "That's one way to build community!" she said.

And the actors have learned to expect the unexpected. During Mr. Vining's 2006 fragment — a slice of Kenneth Brown's vérité military experience, "The Brig" — the noise of the play's Marines irritated residents of a nearby building, prompting the neighbors to throw fruit at the actors. Mr. Vining went as far as to call the police, but now jokes about the ruckus. "Where else but in New York would people throw \$7 tomatoes?" he said.

Until June 30. For more information, visit www.peculiarworks.org.