

THEATER REVIEW | 'OFF STAGE: THE WEST VILLAGE FRAGMENTS'

A Walking History of the Downtown Stage

By JASON ZINOMAN

You couldn't ask for a more beautiful space to stage "Off Stage: The West Village Fragments," a warmhearted and well-researched tribute to the birth of Off Off Broadway that includes a series of excerpts from pioneering downtown plays of the 1960's.

The elegant, twisty streets of the West Village may no longer be home to the cutting edge in theater, but they do provide a lovely background for early works by Sam Shepard, Lanford Wilson and the Living Theater. Created by Ralph Lewis, Catherine Porter and Barry Rowell of Peculiar Works Project, "Fragments" has something of a story — a bit of nonsense about artists trying to collect bail money — but it's really just connective tissue to get the audience from one makeshift stage to another.

The theatergoers initially meet on the traffic island at Avenue of the Americas and Ninth Street, where they're introduced to a stringy-haired actor (Mike Amato) portraying a critic who reports news about a raid on a theater. Then a group of protestors march down Avenue of the Americas, shouting slogans like "Art Before Taxes!" Dressed in jeans and T-shirts, they look more like irritated Mormons than hippies, but why quibble?

After a few seconds of activism, the critic leads the audience to the first production: a short snippet of Kenneth H. Brown's play "The Brig." At Saturday night's performance, the actors were initially shielded from the audience by an oblivious driver, but once her car zoomed away, this timely play about the brutal treatment of prisoners by the military, originally presented in 1963 by the Living Theater, proceeded without incident.

Next, at Seventh Avenue, is a witty scene about male rivalry from a play by Maria Irene Fornes, "The Successful Life of 3," that leaves the audience wanting more.

Many of these pieces, some four decades old, frankly address homosexuality. "Goodnight, I Love You" by William M. Hoffman ("As Is") finds a gay man acting skeptical about his female friend's new interest in women, and Lanford Wilson's lovely "Madness of Lady Bright" is about a lonely old man (played with a bit too much ham by Steve Hauck) surrounded by autographs of his lovers.

What's lost here is any of the adventurous spirit of the original artists, which is what happens when you put shows on a walking tour of the now gentrified West Village. A quintessentially avant-garde play like "Dionysus in 69," the notorious production by the Performance Group and Richard Schechner that blurred lines between performer and audience, actor and character and clothed and unclothed, seems rather quaint and overstaged. When the actors quickly strip to their expensive looking underwear, shielded by a crane, it seems almost modest.

Of course, theater doesn't always lend itself to sound bites, and the lack of context for these plays can make them seem like museum pieces. Perhaps the best way to view the show, which will be a treat for anyone with an interest in the origins of downtown theater, is as a sampler menu, an introduction to a few mostly forgotten plays that may pique your interest and, if so, will make you look into them more.



Erin Baiano for The New York Times
A scene from "Dionysus in 69," part of a site-specific production.

"Off Stage: The West Village Fragments" continues through Oct. 7 at various locations throughout Greenwich Village; (212) 529-3626.