

ARTS, BOOKS AND SPORT

Lost Off-Off Broadway

NEW YORK

AFTER playing a leading part for so long in the avant-garde, New York's Off-Off Broadway theatres are struggling to find a new role. Evidence of the loss of artistic, social and political radicalism is hard to pinpoint, but in reviving "Mysteries and Smaller Pieces" the Living Theatre inadvertently revealed how much Off-Off Broadway has changed since this play was first performed there 30 years ago.

Then, these theatres south of 14th Street were famous for confronting audiences with jarring, vexing, heady productions; then, the Living Theatre and like-minded troupes broke all the rules of dramatic engagement. In reviewing the revival, the *Village Voice* said: "Spare, often silent, and wholly non-verbal, it's a series of hypnotically riveting rituals, just private enough to tantalise you with their public meaning."

This iconoclastic spirit kept Off-Off Broadway in the international avant-garde from the 1950s onwards. La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club created sweeping productions of "Trojan Women", "Medea" and "Electra" spoken in classical Greek. The Ridiculous Theatrical Company produced "Der Ring Gott Farblonjet", an assault on sense and sensibilities in Wagner's "Ring" cycle. The Wooster Group merged ancient and modern texts with video and modern acoustics in the three-storey garage it still occupies. The Ontological-Hysteric Theatre blazed an idiosyncratic trail with maddening enigmas wrapped in strange symbols.

Many techniques introduced by these and other companies have entered the theatrical mainstream. But what comes next now that Off-Off Broadway is no longer in the avant-garde?

The area's marvellous energy has not fizzled. La MaMa, the Wooster Group and the Theatre for the New City are hyperactive. New plays still surface at such venues as Playwrights Horizons and the New York Theatre Workshop, starting points for recent commercial ventures, and at the Ensemble Studio Theatre, where a spring festival of one-act plays always draws a crowd. The Alliance of Resident Theatres counts

more than 170 constituents in New York. Some give new life to old plays; others present new plays that bloom for three weekends and then vanish forever. They range from nomadic theatrical companies which produce plays in bars or on street corners, to companies which own the stages they perform upon and boast classy names on their boards of directors.

But few offer radical ideas; fewer still



Something's off

revolutionary ones. Some in the theatre world attribute Off-Off Broadway's loss of its cutting edge to the tight-fisted city government of Rudolph Giuliani. Coming on top of economies by state and federal arts agencies, the withdrawal of city subsidies will cause many theatre companies to close.

As it is, the comparatively high cost of living in New York city has driven away many of the actors, artists and playwrights who worked in the avant-garde theatre. In fanning out across the country, from Tampa to Seattle, they have introduced exciting theatre to other parts of the United States—but none of these pockets has the critical mass to match, let alone rival, the old radicalism of Off-Off Broadway.

The poverty and uncertainty of Off-Off Broadway have made it more than ever the haunt of the talented, restless young. And sympathetic critics say that to grasp what is happening there you need to consider the

world that is producing these youngsters. Theirs is a life drenched in the possibilities and limitations of video technology. By the time they reach college age, they have logged thousands of hours in front of the television. And computer-age writers and performers weaned on MTV see the stage differently from even their near contemporaries of a decade or two ago.

They go for their audience's jugular, not its cerebellum. They are always hurrying to develop their own careers. When two years can witness three computer chip generations, six months to develop an ensemble theatre piece seems a lot of time wasted. They have no interest in toiling in obscurity for art's sake. For them, selling out is fine, provided they do it on their own terms—"like Madonna".

Plays written and performed by one or two actors fit the demands for high visibility and rapid advancement. This is called performance art, and it is big today Off-Off Broadway. Hot locales offer performances that combine existing styles of dance, music and stand-up comedy. A recent evening at Performance Space 122 (formerly Public School 122) featured four young performers from the experimental theatre wing of the drama department of New York University. Their itchy, edgy personal stories did not vex the audience, still less inflame it. They amused it in the fashion of Eric Begosian, whose droll ramblings about coping with everything have brought him fame, film contracts and many imitators.

Rather than disrupt the existing order, as the performers of the avant-garde aimed to do, would-be Begosians set out to create order from their own internal disarray. Margaret O'Sullivan began with a third-person narrative about a strip dancer, nude except for the g-string that is her only shield against men proffering cash in exchange for attention. Without warning, she jumps into another character: a teenage virgin pursuing a rock musician in San Francisco. "There's no through line, if you were expecting one," she told the audience. She was followed by Dawn Tobin, who spun an engaging tale of wisdom-tooth surgery and a girl's coming of age, punctuated now and again by vocal blues riffs she had composed herself.

The appeal is more visceral than intellectual. The extreme end of today's Off-Off Broadway theatre features Ron Athey drawing his partner's HIV-positive blood on stage and carving designs in the skin of his

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partner, blotting the blood and displaying the results as art—rituals born in clubs that cater to homosexuals who enjoy the sado-masochistic practice known as “body modification”. Apt titles adorn Mr Athey’s two best known works: “Martyrs and Saints” and “Four Scenes in a Harsh Life”. But then, unlike yesterday’s plays Off-Off Broadway, today’s performances aim to divert rather than to radicalise.

Archaeology

Over-endowed

ROME

A RCHAEOLOGICAL exhibitions pose special challenges. Often every shard and broken fragment is precious. But at two shows in Rome the problem, oddly, is an excess and a paucity of material.

The bigger of the two is devoted to the ancient Syrian town of Ebla, which flourished between 2,400BC and 1,600BC. It is at Rome’s Palazzo Venezia until July 15th, moves on to Trieste till January 7th next year and then travels on to America and Japan.

Twenty years ago, the discovery of a cache of 17,000 cuneiform tablets in a room of Ebla’s royal palace attracted worldwide attention to a dusty dig master-minded by Paolo Matthiae. Besides providing useful information on the city’s administration and the kings who ruled it, the archives included bilingual texts listing over 1,500 ancient Sumerian words and their equivalents

in the language of Ebla—the oldest recorded Semitic language. Thanks to these early dictionaries, archaeologists translated the world’s first surviving peace treaty—between Ebla and the neighbouring kingdom of Abarsal.

The treaty is on view at the exhibition, laid out as a tortuous trek through 30 panelled-off sections, to conjure up, say the planners, the thrill of discovery. If the long stretch of introductory panels and photographs is archaeological fare of the more arid kind, the uninitiated will enjoy the highly original statuary and the fine gold workmanship from Ebla’s royal tombs.

The other show, at Palazzo delle Esposizioni until September 4th, is dedicated to Lysippus, the Greek sculptor who created likenesses of Alexander the Great. It is, in effect, a retrospective exhibition in the contemporary style of a close-to-legendary figure of antiquity—something which its curator, Paolo Moreno, says has never been attempted before. Though Lysippus’s work is amply recorded by classical writers, only a tiny fraction of his reputedly prolific production has survived to the present day. He worked in bronze, a metal coveted by kings and soldiers for melting down as coins and weapons. If we know (or think we do) what



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some of his statues looked like, this is largely due to the marble copies Lysippus’s work inspired—often long after his own lifetime.

The show attempts to trace this long-lived artist’s career from Greece to Macedonia, the Near East and on to Italy (Lysippus was born around 390BC and worked, it is believed, until over 80). Inscriptions, coins and statues from museums across the world show the astonishing fame of Lysippus’s works, many of which crop up on all manner of classical coins, vases, sarcophaguses and bas-reliefs.

Despite the show’s generally high quality, there are frustrating gaps. The Farnese Hercules, close to three metres (about ten feet) in height, was not brought up from Naples. A cast is a clumsy substitute.

The last section was intended to show the sweep of Lysippus’s influence on later art, but the money ran out.

The “great absentee” according to Mr Moreno is the life-size bronze figure of an athlete at the Getty museum in Malibu, a rarity attributed, though not by everyone, to Lysippus. Smuggled out of Italy in 1977 after a fisherman dredged it from the Adriatic, the bronze would be seized with pleasure by Italian authorities if shown there.