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Off Theater

Florencia Dansilio

This article traces the transatlantic movements of the idea of alternative theater from the 1940s to today.

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Off-Broadway emerged in late 1940s New York as small theaters opened in downtown Manhattan's East Village and West Village. They provided an alternative to the big-budget productions in large private theaters in midtown's Theater District around Times Square. Unlike them, Off-Broadway venues were managed by non-profit organizations and staged avant-garde plays that have updated the repertory with experimental productions. At first, Off-Broadway was a geographical marker—the theaters were far from Times Square—but also a political one: new artists offered an alternative to the commercial theater that

had dominated the New York stage since the early 20^th century. Lastly, it was an artistic marker: drawing inspiration from the European avant-gardes, their aim was to reinvent American theater with new languages fostered by the singularity of a city that in the mid-20^th century became the new cultural metropolis of the Western world.

However, what started out as a local phenomenon created by a network of actors, with a specific urban configuration which was meant to deal with the economic challenges of the American theater, became an attractive label covering many theatrical events far from the Village. The Off-Broadway idea was taken up in various urban, political and artistic contexts during the second half of the 20^th century. It first accompanied the emergence of regional theaters in other North American cities. Then, once some American Off-Broadway productions became famous and began to travel abroad, the term was taken up in Europe to denote the off-shoots of major theater festivals: Avignon, in France, is the best known example. By the late 20^th century, when Off-Broadway theater in New York was only a faint echo of what it had been in the 1960s and the Avignon Off festival had lost the anti-establishment character of its origins, new circuits of alternative theater appeared in South America. One of their distinguishing features was self-management to cope with neoliberal budgetary austerity after the military dictatorships fell. In Buenos Aires, for example, the growth of Off-Corrientes theater between the 1980s and 2000 allowed artists to survive economic precarity and establish independent production methods. The works were so successful that the Argentine capital's thriving non-commercial theater scene is still an international reference.

We will analyze three uses of the idea through time in order to trace the transatlantic trajectories of alternative theater. First, we will trace Off-Broadway's origins in New York during the postwar period and the emergence of Off-Off-Broadway at the heart of the countercultural movement in the 1960s. Then we will examine the international repercussions of this new avant-garde form, especially in Europe, with the success of companies like the Living Theatre and the creation of the Avignon Off Festival in 1968. Lastly, we will cross back to the other side of the Atlantic to study how New York's Off-Broadway scene, combined with local dynamics, inspired the emergence of fringe theater in southern Latin America starting in the 1980s. A complex cartography of the Atlantic will take shape, revealing a subtle interplay of scales between the local dimension of the "off" phenomenon (anchored in a city and very often in a neighborhood) and its international dissemination.

The birth of Off-Broadway in New York

The first Off-Broadway theaters appeared in the late 1940s outside the theater district, which stretches from 40^th to 54^th Street and Sixth Avenue to Eighth Avenue. Off-Broadway aimed to offer an alternative to the growth of commercialism in the performing arts, which precluded risky or experimental works. Far from being a fleeting phenomenon, it became a full-fledged circuit. The phenomenon unfolded in two stages. In the 1950s, the first theaters developed after the success of Tennessee Williams' play *Summer and Smoke* staged by Panamanian director José Quintero at Circle in the Square (1951). But the rising popularity of Off-Broadway and its integration into the same market economy that it denounced led to conflicts of interest. The 1960s saw the start of a second moment, Off-Off Broadway, characterized by the emergence of new underground or countercultural spaces that sought to invent other ways of creation and reception in order to challenge more conventional ideas of theater.

The location of the first Off-Broadway theaters demonstrates how, at first, they were geographically anchored in the community. According to Stuart W. Little, the rich cultural fertility of Greenwich Village is what fostered their emergence: in the early 20^th century, small theaters and cafés, artists who lived and

worked in the area and European immigrant communities that sprang up there fostered a "general air of revolt—literary, political, social, theatrical" in the neighborhood. [1] From the 1920s, Greenwich Village was home to independent organizations of artists and writers such as The Washington Square Players, The Provincetown Players and The Theatre Guild, while the Neighborhood Playhouse was established on Grand Street and The Henry Street Settlement House on the Lower East Side. All were the forerunners of Off-Broadway.

Migratory flows had a major influence on the neighborhood, where many European immigrants settled, especially between the wars. It also became a center of socialization for Latino artists in New York. The network of Jewish émigrés played a key role in the socialization of new artists and the development of the idea that art could have a political purpose. Julian Beck and Judith Malina, who founded The Living Theatre, one of Off-Broadway's most famous companies, met each other in these circles. As the Nazis' rose to power in Germany and tensions rocked the world of intellectuals in Europe, intellectuals and artists came to New York. Malina, for example, was a student of German director Erwin Piscator, who in 1933 fled Germany for the United States, bringing his ideas and his "proletarian theater" with him. This was explicitly political theater conceived of as a tool of awareness-raising and cultural revolution for and by the working class. Piscator gave the future creators of The Living Theater the idea of leaving Broadway.

Circle in the Square (opened 1951 at 5 Sheridan Square), the Cherry Lane Theater (38 Commerce Street between Barrow and Bedford Streets) and the Phoenix Theater (opened 1953 in the former Yiddish Art Theater at the corner of 12^th Street and Second Avenue) were Off-Broadway trailblazers. The Living Theatre Studio and the first workshops of Joseph Papp (future head of Shakespeare in the Park, who became famous years later) moved close by to 530 Sixth Avenue. The centers of socialization and meeting places near the theaters also contributed to nurturing the creativity of Off-Broadway. For example, near the Cherry Lane, Judith Malina, Julian Beck and Allen Ginsberg would meet at the San Remo Café, the beat poets' watering hole.



Julian Beck at the door of the Cherry Lane Theater

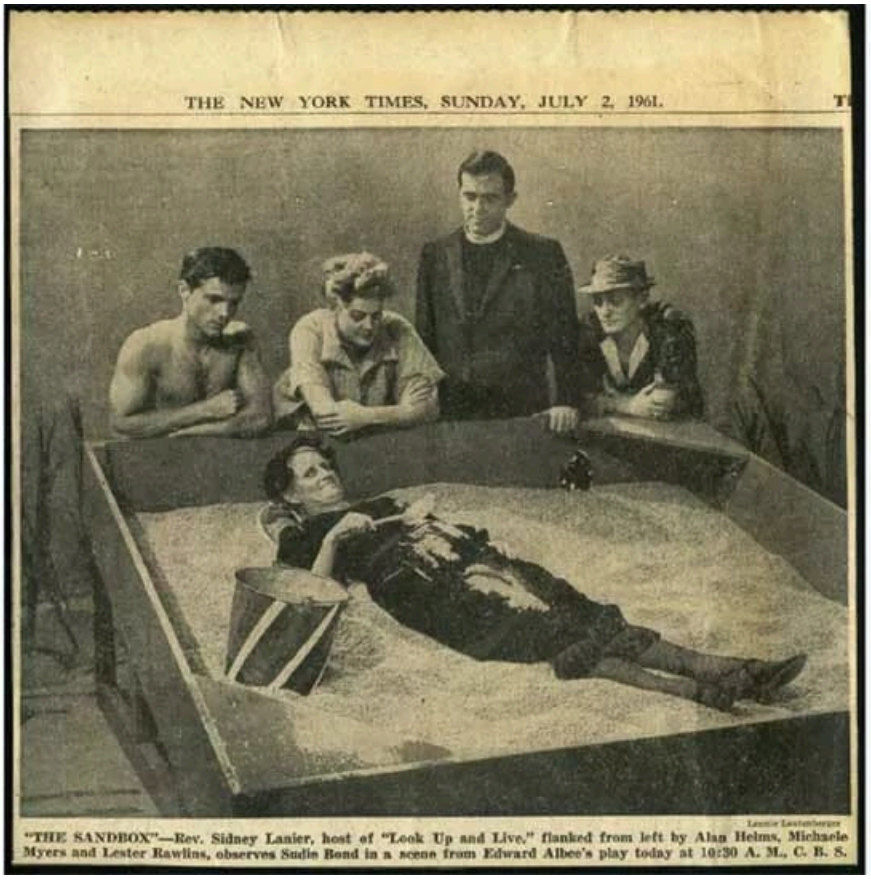
Source: Courtesy The Living Theatre Archive at the Beinecke Rare Book Library at Yale University

The Cherry Lane is an emblematic Off-Broadway theater, first because of its history: it was a granary built in 1817 and converted into a tobacco warehouse before the Provincetown Players, a group of writers and artists, turned it into a theater in 1924. It was, therefore, not purpose-built for the arts. This became one of Off-Broadway's trademarks. The Cherry Lane is also emblematic for its programming: it staged experimental works right from the start. In its early years, the theater produced works by several European playwrights, including Luigi Pirandello (*Henry IV* in 1947), Samuel Beckett (*Endgame*, 1957), Jean Anouilh (*Thieves' Carnival*, 1955) and, later, pieces by the young Spaniard Fernando Arrabal, who founded the Panic movement in France (*Picnic on the Battlefield*, 1962). It also hosted the Living Theater's first plays (*The Thirteenth God*, 1948, *The Heroes*, 1952, *King Ubu*, 1952) as well as works by other American avant-garde artists, such as John Cage (*Music of Changes*, 1952), Sean O'Casey (*Purple Dust*, 1956), Edward Albee (*The American Dream*, 1961, *The Sandbox,* 1962) and Sam Shepard (*Up to Thursday*, 1965). Lastly, the Cherry Lane was frequented by Greenwich Village's bohemian artists (musicians like Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger performed there years before becoming famous).



Poster for Beckett's *Endgame*, 1957

Source: Cherry Lane Theatre


THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JULY 2, 1961.

"THE SANDBOX"—Rev. Sidney Lanier, host of "Look Up and Live," flanked from left by Alan Helms, Michaele Myers and Lester Rawlins, observes Sudie Bond in a scene from Edward Albee's play today at 10:30 A. M., C. B. S.

New York Times article on Edward Albee's *The Sandbox* (1961)

Source: Cherry Lane Theatre



Sam Shepard, Harvey Keitel and Joyce Aaron in front of the Cherry Lane, 1965

Source: Cherry Lane Theatre

This non-exhaustive list reflects programming that both promoted new local artists and served as an artistic bridge between Europe and the United States. Off-Broadway embraced young North American playwrights like Edward Albee, Jack Richardson, Jack Gelber and Sam Shepard while introducing postwar European authors such as Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco and Jean Genet to the United States. In the

1950s and 1960s, then, Off-Broadway was the nexus of exchanges and the proliferation of avant-garde theatrical trends between the United States and Europe. Postwar European plays were introduced to North America while young New York artists appropriated them to shape alternative ways of making theater that later traveled back across the Atlantic.

Location and programming were not the only things that defined Off-Broadway: so was the lack of a legal definition. Because of their unconventional nature, the theaters faced recurring problems with the government, whether struggling to obtain operating licenses or avoiding police checks, which often resulted in being shut down. In addition, they clashed on several occasions with the Actors' Equity Association (AEA), the labor union representing actors and stage managers. Their small size, limited budgets and experimental character prevented them from complying with the wage agreements established by the union, which were drawn up with big Broadway shows in mind. In 1959, several Off-Broadway theaters created a parallel organization to negotiate wages geared towards independent productions. This was the Off-Broadway League of Theatres (OBLT), which officialized the term Off-Broadway. Theaters with 299 seats inclusive were considered Off-Broadway. The number was raised to 499 in 1974.

Off-Off Broadway and its repercussions in the Sixties

Between 1959 and 1963, Off-Broadway expanded, won recognition from theater critics and even influenced big Broadway productions. Two economic factors promoted this growth. First, the theaters were often run by non-profit organizations, making them tax-exempt. Second, government subsidies and grants contributed to the construction of modern theaters and the artists' influence. However, these resources dried up by the end of the decade, forcing theaters to produce more profitable shows. This led to the emergence of Off-Off Broadway, which decried the commercialization of Off-Broadway and the depletion of its creativity.

While it followed a similar pattern to the one that fostered the emergence of Off-Broadway, the appearance of Off-Off-Broadway in the 1960s was a phenomenon in its own right that accompanied the counter-cultural movement. The plays challenged theatrical conventions and called the characteristics of the performance space into question. New venues that combined theaters, cafés, experimental workshops and nightclubs hosted the most experimental artists. Most of them mixed disciplines. Caffe Cino, which Joe Cino opened at 31 Cornelia Street in 1958, was the trailblazer. A café with a small makeshift stage where unconventional performances took place, it was also one of the first places of gay socialization in New York.



Exterior of Caffe Cino in 1965

Source: NYPL - James Gossage Collection at the Billy Rose Theatre Division



Interior of Caffé Cino

Source: Ben Martin Caffe Cino Photos

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKS3f5zxdys

Documentary about Caffe Cino

Source: YouTube

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fbhmed817w8

Robert Patrick giving a lecture about Caffe Cino

Source: YouTube

In 1961, the emblematic La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club opened in a basement on East 9^th Street, later moving to 82 Second Avenue and 74A East 4^th Street. Headed by Afro-American Ellen Stewart, it featured works by ethnic minorities and promoted international exchanges by welcoming many foreign troupes. La MaMa hosted the first performances in the United States by England's Peter Brook, Poland's Tadeusz Kantor, Romania's Andrei Serban and legendary Japanese Buto dancer Kazuo Ono. Theatre Genesis (opened 1964 in historic St Mark's church) and the Judson Poets' Theatre (opened 1961 in Judson Memorial Church, a hub of gay activism) were other early Off-Off-Broadway venues. In the early 1970s, the creation of the Off-Off Broadway Alliance (OOBA) officialized the new circuit (again defined by seating capacity, this time limited to 99).



La MaMa, *Hurrah for the Bridge* (1963)

Source: La MaMa Archive Ellen Stewart Private Collection



La MaMa at 82 2^nd Avenue. "Happening At The Cafe" flyer (1964)

Source: La MaMa Archive Ellen Stewart Private Collection



Audience at Café La Mama at 122 2^nd Avenue, 1966

Source: NYPL—James Gossage Collection at Billy Rose Theatre Division



Their Hearts Belong to La Mama

By JOSH GREENFELD

THE theater is an ensemble effort which ultimately depends upon a singularly strong and uncommonly resolute individual. Ideally it is the driven playwright, often it is the charismatic director or the star actor, but usually it is the prosaic producer, someone who somehow manages to see that bills get paid, that shows can go on. And the producer survives, theatrical tradition holds, only because beneath his rough, crusty exterior beats a heart of Carborundum.

But Ellen Stewart, the most active producer in New York City, the most active theater center in America, could not be farther from the stereotype. "I have never seen anyone," says a veteran observer of the New York theater scene, "so incredibly naive and as abysmally uninformed of theatrical realities as Ellen."

Yet, as the mama — or perhaps midwife—of La Mama ETC (Experimental Theater Club), a coffeehouse theater that epitomizes the Off Off Broadway movement, Miss Stewart, a slender, intense Negro, has presided over the birth of more than 200 plays by more than 100 playwrights in a six-year period—figures that even a David Merrick may wiggle his mustache at in awe.

Recently, she has returned to New York from Europe after supervising the start of her theater's repertory company summer tour there. Usually, she is busy producing a new American play every two weeks, setting up programs of new Spanish plays

JOSH GREENFELD, freelance critic and author of an Off Broadway play ["Clandestine on the Morning Line"], is at work on a novel.

FOUNDER—Ellen Stewart presides at a meeting of La Mama ETC [Experimental Theater Club], her way Off Off Broadway theater for untried playwrights, players and directors.

PLAYS — Miss Stewart selects all plays shown at La Mama; they must, as she puts it, "beep" to her. On facing page, two that beeped: Rochelle Owens's play [top] about a man who falls in love with a pig and is murdered by his townsfolk, and Tom Eyen's story of seduction, presented in the form of a basketball game.

New York Times Magazine article about La MaMa ETC in 1967

Source: La MaMa Archive Ellen Stewart Private Collection

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QAvhhdOoFqs

Short film about the history of La MaMa ETC

Source: YouTube

The number of Off-Off Broadway venues—churches, garages, lofts, cafés, social centers, firehouses, private apartments, hotel rooms, sometimes even the street—rose quickly in the 1960s. The use of unconventional spaces (linked to the productions' precariousness and a quest for aesthetic renewal) and the opening of a grey area between amateur and professional theater are the new concept's main characteristics.

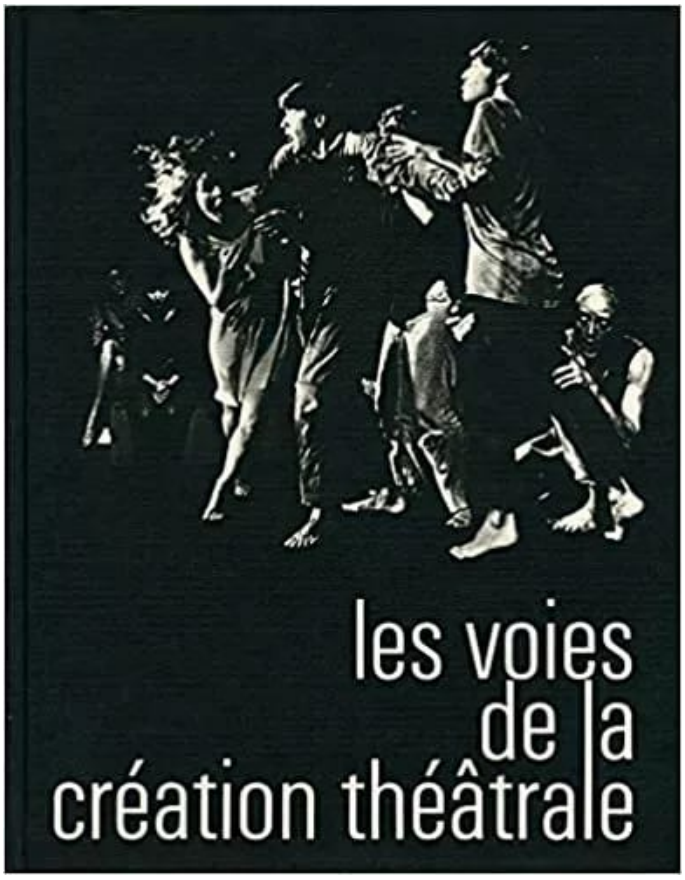
This spontaneous, ephemeral sub-circuit was fertile ground for the renewal of American theater, not only in New York, but also in other major cities of the country, where the rise of the counterculture fed an "anti-Broadway" position.

The idea of Off-Broadway began to move beyond the borders of the United States. In Europe, the concept was spread by the Living Theatre, La MaMa ETC tours, the dissemination of Open Theater plays and the fascination with happenings.



Ellen Stewart and Jean-Claude Van Italie in a workshop at the American Center in Paris during the tour of *America Hurrah (Motel)*

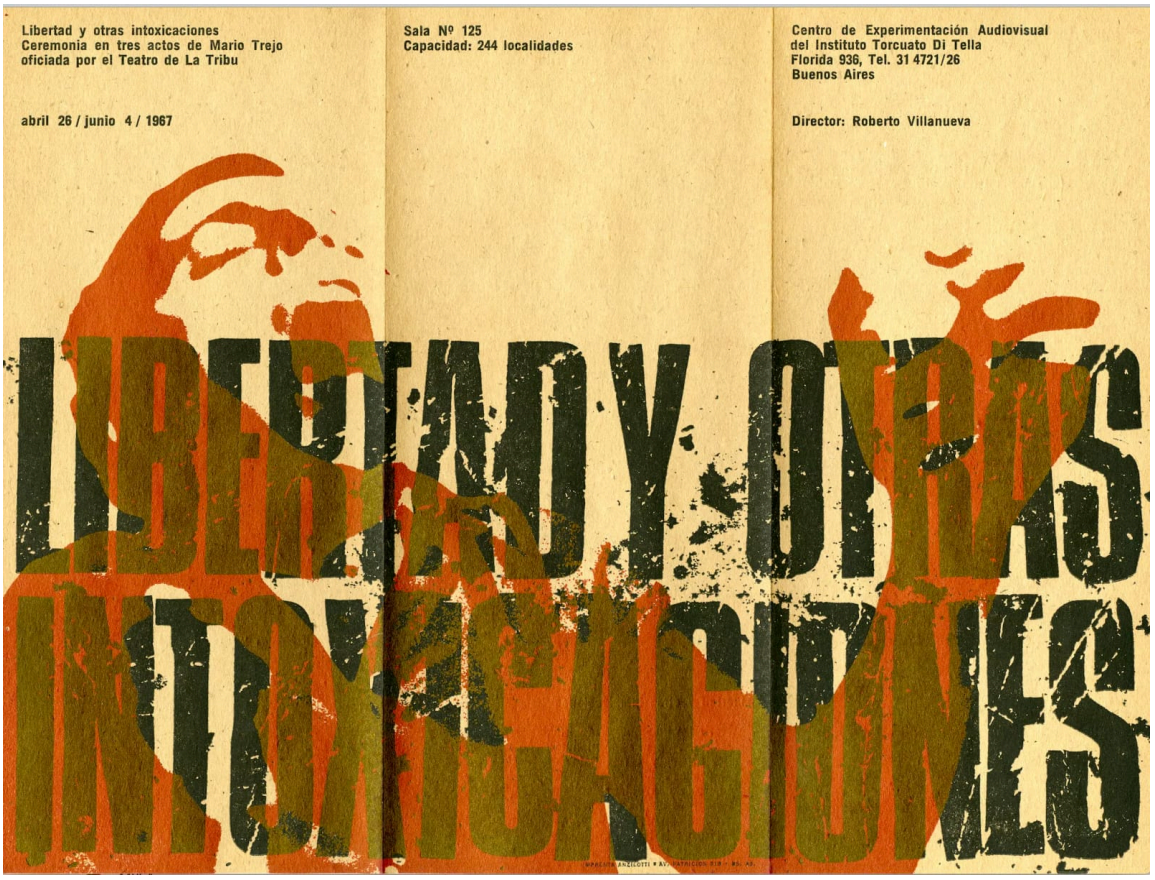
Source: La MaMa Archive Ellen Stewart Private Collection



First issue of *Les voies de la création théâtrale* (CNRS) in 1970, devoted to new avant-gardes

Source: Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Off-Off-Broadway also found admirers in Latin America. It was a reference point for young artists wanting to break with local theater traditions and promote a more realistic, narrative and textual theater. This was the case between 1964 and 1969 at the Di Tella Institute's Audiovisual Experimentation Center in Buenos Aires. The Living Theatre and the work of Poland's Jerzy Grotowski inspired the center, which cultural critics at the time likened to the New York avant-garde. At the height of the Cold War, some politically-minded artists considered it another example of North American cultural colonization. However, in a 1968 article published by the magazine *Primera Plana*, a journalist wrote: "This was bound to happen, despite rejections, warnings and self-censorship: avant-garde theater, which mainly comes from Off-Off-Broadway in New York and fringe theater in London, has arrived in Buenos Aires and is here to stay."



Playbill for Mario Trejo's *Libertad y otras intoxicaciones*

Source: Archive de l'Instituto Di Tella de Buenos Aires, Bibliothèque de la Université Di Tella

Al Living Theatre, a los poetas. M. T.

La tortura es —como arte de descubrir la verdad— una estupidez de bárbaros; es decir, la aplicación de un medio material a un fin espiritual. Baudelaire

Rindo tributo a los artistas de la escena que nos ofrecen al hombre bajo todas sus máscaras y, de este modo, nos devuelven a nosotros mismos tan verdaderos como somos. Lyndon B. Johnson

Los leopardos irrumpen en el templo y vuelcan los objetos sagrados. Esto se repite hasta que por fin puede preverse el momento exacto. Entonces se convierte en parte del rito. Kafka

"¿El teatro puede ser un arte para las masas? En la era del cine y de la televisión tal idea es anacrónica. Un TV Hamlet puede ser visto en una noche por más gente que en cuatro siglos.
Se trata entonces de crear un arte sutil, un arte para la élite. ¿Pero cuál es el significado de la palabra »élite«? Su significado no tiene nada que ver con el snobismo intelectual. Por lo contrario, lo que queremos decir es que el teatro debe ser una ocasión especial, una ocasión »élite« en la vida de todo hombre. No queremos que el teatro sea un plato de todos los días —como el cine y la TV. Queremos que represente algo sagrado para el más común de los ciudadanos." Jerzy Grotowski

Libertad y otras intoxicaciones
Ceremonia en tres actos de Mario Trejo
oficiada por el Teatro de La Tribu

La obsesión principal es el canibalismo, en todas sus formas, con todas sus ceremonias: à chacun son juif, su negro, su amarillo, su cabecita negra, su latinoamericano, su pobre, su diferente.

Aborto sin dolor —también llamado píldora—, violación, castración, Dachau, sacrificios, a lo largo de la historia la humanidad ha venido ejercitando estos rituales, brutal o sutilmente, física o intelectualmente. Comprender no basta. Se necesita la blood consciousness que pedía D. H. Lawrence. Los intelectuales se conforman, en general, con pensar de un modo y vivir de otro. Pero nadie puede creer ya que un poema salve la vida de un vietnamita.

Muerte entonces a los embajadores surrealistas. Mes enfants: Pot is not the Drug. Ruido no es sonido.

Se trata de manifestar, no de representar. Se trata de espontaneidad, no de improvisación. Rascarse la cabeza o meterse el dedo en la nariz es un acto de espontaneidad, no de improvisación.

El trabajo de laboratorio con los actores tuvo como punto de partida el »action-theatre« (Ken Dewey, por ejemplo). El ejercicio militar es un homenaje a »The Brig« (Kenneth Brown). La tortura está inspirada en Frantz Fanon. El fin de la especie —que comienza con el zumbido circular y termina con la pila funeraria— están tomados del »Living Theatre«, al que tanto le debo. M. T.

Libertad y otras intoxicaciones

1 Morir de insomnio o de lucidez
2 Máquina de atrapar planetas y otros juegos
3 Por el Rey y por la Patria
4 El proceso
5 El uso de la palabra
6 Posibilidades de la tortura
7 Flagelación, sacrificio y devoración
8 El fin de la infancia
9 La lucha personal

Elenco

Juliana Balint: (Budapest). Empleada.
José Antonio Barzak: Poeta ("Los firuletes necesarios").
Horacio Borges: Actor ("El Burlador", "Ubu Rey").
Rolf Brüning: (Bremen). Estudiante de la Plaakatmaler, artista gráfico.
Rubén de León: Estudiante de arquitectura. Coautor de "Ostinato".
Mónica Douek: Dibujante, traductora.
Diego de Elizalde: Periodista.
Lía de Elizalde: Estudiante.
Marta Esviza: Actriz ("La ladrona de Londres").
Kado Kostzer: Estudiante de arquitectura, pintor.
Manuel Merino Gutiérrez: (París). Estudiante de filosofía, viajero.
Oscar Novoa: Obrero metalúrgico, actor ("La ladrona de Londres").
José Peroni: Poeta ("Cuerito Viejo Verde").
Roberto Plate: Pintor, estudios en Munich.
Abel Sáenz Buhr: Actor y director del Teatro del Altillo ("No hay piedad para Hamlet", "Los viajeros del tren a la Luna").
Humphry Trevelyan: (Cambridge). Sociólogo, actor, folk-singer.

Relator: José María Gutiérrez
Levítico e Isaías: Roberto Villanueva
Canto: Marta Lambertini
Guitarra: Julio Martín Viera

Diapositivas: Lidy Prati y Fernando von Reichenbach
Coordinadores: Leopoldo Nacht y Carlos Cutaia
Ayudante de escena: Pedro Robertie

Puesta en escena y dirección general: Mario Trejo.

Banda de sonido realizada en el Estudio de Grabación del C.E.A.

Asesor: César Bolaños
Compaginación: Walter Guth
Supervisión técnica: Fernando von Reichenbach
Técnico de sonido: Walter Guth
Operador de sonido: Enrique Jorgensen
Operador de luces: Francisco Cortese

Hand program of *Libertad y otras intoxicaciones* by Mario Trejo

Source: Archive de l'Instituto Di Tella de Buenos Aires, Bibliothèque de la Université Di Tella

off-off-Broadway es a la vez su ruina y su bendición. Casi todos trabajan por nada; en algunos lugares como el Caffe Cino y el Judson se efectúan colectas después de cada actuación, pitanza que se divide entre los autores. "En un período de dos años y medio hice veinte obras nuevas. *Off-off-Broadway* es el único lugar donde se puede experimentar", dice el actor Keoni O'Connor.

Gorilla Queen, que iguala a cualquier producción de Broadway en trajes, maquillaje e inventiva teatral, cuesta menos de 200 dólares en Judson; en Broadway hubiera sido mil veces más cara. De los grupos, sólo el Teatro Genesis, en St. Mark's, tiene una subvención de 180 mil dólares del Departamento Norteamericano de Salud, Educación y Bienestar. Ralph Cook, director del Teatro Genesis, dice: "Debemos otorgar subsidios a los teatros pequeños. Con 10 millones de dólares se podría mantener a cien teatros durante cinco años, y además se produciría una revolución teatral".

El director Jacques Levy quiere un teatro que sea "perpetuo y físico". Larry Kornfeld, imaginativo director del



Robert R. McElroy - Newsweek.

Ensayo de* Tom Paine *en La Mama.

Judson, dice: "Me doy cuenta de que lo que estoy haciendo es diferente, pero no me lo propuse. Mi teoría es que cuando se llega a un límite, es necesario elegir lo extremo. No razone. ¡Hágalo! ¡Hágalo!"

El OOB comenzó en 1958; fue cuando Joe Cino invitó al primer dramaturgo a su Caffe Cino, y transformó su establecimiento en un diminuto teatro de bolsillo. Cálido y comunicativo, Cino dio la bienvenida a obras de todo tipo, desde *Dames at Sea*, nostálgica cabalgata de las comedias musicales de la década del 30, hasta *The Madness of Lady Bright*, visión candente y comprensiva de un homosexual solitario. Cuando Cino se suicidó este mes, todo el *off-off-Broadway* se reunió en la iglesia Judson para rendirle homenaje, en un servicio religioso de teatro, música y danza, con muchas obras producidas por primera vez en el Caffe inventado por el muerto.

Aunque Cino fue el padre del movimiento, Ellen Stewart, una seductora negra, diseñadora de modelos, es con toda seguridad *La Mama*. En 1962, comenzó a producir obras teatrales en un sótano de East 9th Street, y desde entonces ha sido importunada por los vecinos, perseguida por la Municipalidad y el Departamento de Bomberos, acusada por la Asociación de Actores. Miss Stewart ha descubierto y alimentado a unos 130 dramaturgos noveles, hizo la primera producción de 175 obras nuevas, reestrenó muchas de ellas por toda Europa y ayudó a sus autores a publicarlas. Lo ha hecho con dedicación, brillantez promocional y carácter, casi sin dinero. Actualmente sólo está endeudada en varios miles de dólares. Para La Mama lo que cuenta es el dramaturgo: deja todo en sus manos.

Pero en Judson Memorial Church, una enorme estructura a la italiana, en Washington Square, hay un director: el reverendo Al Carmines (30 años). En cinco años y medio de vida, el Judson Poet's Theater ha puesto en escena unas setenta producciones deslumbradoramente variadas, desde *The Pelican*, de Strindberg, raramente representada, hasta *What Happened*, una encantadora pieza bailada sobre un texto de Gertrude Stein. Según Michael Smith, crítico teatral de *The Village Voice* y portavoz del OOB, "Judson ha producido, en su totalidad, lo mejor que se ha visto ahora en *off-off-Broadway*".

El centro más joven de OOB es St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bouwerie, una vieja iglesia del East Village, donde en 1964 el reverendo Michael Allen formó el Teatro Genesis: 37 obras nuevas de dieciocho dramaturgos en un pequeño teatro sin ventanas. Por momentos crudas, a menudo obsesionadas con el sexo y el excremento, como *Sand*, de Murray Mednick, las obras escandalizarían al feligrés común; pero no a los de St. Mark. Dice Cook, el director: "El dramaturgo tiene completa libertad para ofender o para disgustar a nuestros públicos; pero seguirán viniendo. Solamente por eso tenemos un renacimiento en el teatro".

El foco del OOB es el Open Theater, un taller dramático de cuatro años de antigüedad. Es un grupo informal de actores, directores (entre ellos Jacques Levy y el fundador Joseph Chaikin, una especie de Peter Brook norteamericano) y dramaturgos que se reúnen varias veces por semana en un viejo altillo con corrientes de aire del Greenwich Village, para crear un "diálogo de trabajo".

El grupo se ejercita con un impecable trabajo físico; por ejemplo: danza, calistenia, acrobacia y ejercicios vocales. Como explica Levy, "el teatro no es la vida real; son los actores representando algo". Lo que Levy quiere es que "el público experimente el fenómeno, se ría, que se escandalice y no que se identifique con él; y para poder hacerlo estoy dispuesto a romper las ataduras psicológicas". Según Levy, actores y dramaturgos deben dejarse llevar por la imaginación.

Eso es, exactamente, lo que ha sucedido, y cualquiera que se pregunte dónde están los nuevos dramaturgos norteamericanos sólo necesita dirigir la vista hacia *off-off-Broadway*. Está Leonard Melfi, personaje parecido a Behan, cuyo don para la comedia puede llevarlo, quiera o no, a ser el primer escritor OOB que aterrice en Broadway; su obra *The Jones Man* ha sido elegida para la próxima temporada. Lanford Wilson es un brillante dramaturgo cuya obra evocativa lírica *The Rimers of Eldritch*, fue presentada con éxito esta año en *off-Broadway*. El intelectualizado Paul Foster estrenará una obra con música, *Tom Paine*, a la que todavía agrega escena tras escena para los artistas de La Mama.

El poeta Ronald Travel, nacido en Brooklyn, ha escrito once filma para Andy Warhol, además de farsas ultrajantes como *La vida de Juanita Castro* e *Indira Gandhi's Daring Device*, obra que recientemente le trajo problemas con el gobierno indio. El gran éxito de Jean-Claude van Itallie, *America Hurrah*, abrió todas las puertas al dramaturgo, nacido en Bruselas y educado en Harvard. Junto a otros en el Open Theatre, trabajaba actualmente en una dramatización musical del asesinato de Kennedy, que podrá resultar "una obra teatral, una ópera, o cualquier otra cosa".

Por acuerdo general de sus pares, el más osado y original de los dramaturgos OOB es Sam Shepard (23 años). Su meta es nada menos que "cambiar las áreas de realidad que el público trae al teatro". Sus personajes entran y salen de la palabra, del traje, del personaje. En los últimos diez minutos de *La turista*, los dos actores se gritan con toda la fuerza de sus pulmones, y exactamente al unísono, lo que hace muy difícil seguir el diálogo, por supuesto. Eso, según el director Jacques Levy no viene al caso; lo que él y Shepard buscan es un experimento empleando el discurso humano como sonido.

Shepard, un muchacho larguirucho con aspecto de *cowboy*, dice: "El teatro es anticuado. Nadie se arriesga. Hay algo realmente teatral en lo que hacen los grupos de *rock'n'roll*. Nada de lo que sucede actualmente en el teatro se acerca a ese bombardeo de todos los sentidos".

Shepard ha escrito cerca de 100 obras y unas doce fueron producidas *off-off-Broadway*. Actualmente se lo descubre y se lo atrae a lo que él llama "la corriente intelectual". Después que la crítica Elizabeth Hardwick aclamó a *La turista* en *The New York Review of Books* ("Con esta obra, la promesa de los altillos de *off-off-Broadway*, la dedicación y la independencia llegan a su logro más extraordinario"), el público estuvo preparado para comprender a sus verdugos y para pedirles mayores ultrajes. Actualmente Sam trabaja en una nueva obra llamada *The Marijuana Hoax*. "Todavía no sé de qué se trata; tiene algo que ver con la imposición al público de una existencia, aprisionada en el escenario, pero no tan explícito como eso."

Conducido por dramaturgos como Shepard e innovadores como Chaikin, el OOB comienza a filtrarse a través de la conciencia masiva. El Open Theatre es alentado por varios colegas para que forme una compañía residente, y por los productores para que acepte dinero y termine algunas obras en preparación. Chaikin dice: "Cientos de actores nos envían antecedentes y fotografías como si fuéramos una com-

Primera Plana article, May 23, 1967, no. 230.

Source: Biblioteca del Congreso de la Nación Argentina



pañía que busca elencos". Ellen Stewart hará una *tournée* con su *troupe* el mes que viene; será el tercer verano consecutivo, y llevará al OOB a Italia, Suecia, Dinamarca, Holanda, Inglaterra, Polonia, Yugoslavia, Rusia, y a los festivales de Dublin, Francfort y Edimburgo.

Paul Foster dice: "Hay una fraternidad de pequeños teatros en América y Europa". El OOB ya no es subterráneo; está en todas partes. No hay límites visibles. Como dice Rochelle Owens, "sería maravilloso que Broadway tuviera una inyección de energía". Pero lo más sano del movimiento es su aire de independencia. La actriz Jacque Lynn Coltone afirma: "Vamos a infiltrarnos en el teatro comercial tal cual somos". ◆

Copyright Newsweek, 1967

Cine

Historia de un ruido sin ninguna furia

Cuando Peter Sellers examinó las pruebas de sonido de su última comedia, *The Bobo*, torció la cara con desagrado. "No sirven —sentenció—. En mi archivo tengo todos los ruidos del mundo y se los cedo gratuitamente."

Acostumbrado a filmar con sonido directo, como la mayoría de los directores norteamericanos, Robert Parrish —el realizador—, aceptó. Se dejó llevar hasta la casa que Sellers alquila en Roma y descubrió, pasmado, un cósmico museo acumulado por su dueño durante veinte años.

La manía del actor llega al delirio: en interminables bobinas magnetofónicas ha registrado el canto de los pájaros, el hipo de un recién nacido, el gorgoteo del agua de un lavatorio, la pinchadura de un neumático, la pinchadura de dos neumáticos, la erupción de un volcán.

The Bobo, una comedia visual, melancólica, cuenta los tropiezos de un torero obsesionado por el canto. Sellers es el torero y pese a que su voz es tan desastrosa como su habilidad para la lidia, logra un contrato sujeto a una sola condición: seducir a una muchacha, famosa por acostarse sólo con multimillonarios y galanes vistosos.

Una escena clave del film sucede en un patio andaluz. Sobre un tablado lleno de geranios y claveles, una bailarina hace repiquetear sus tacones al compás de palmas, guitarras y castañuelas. El equipo de sonido no había podido captar con fidelidad el golpeteo. Peter Sellers se introdujo bajo el estrecho tablado con su grabador. Estuvo allí más de dos horas y debió ser retirado maltrecho y cubierto de polvo.

Pero no sólo el sonido es la pasión de Sellers. Su inventiva no conoce límites. Parrish (51 años) reconoce que *The Bobo*—le debe algunos diálogos de comicidad feroz. Es posible: el realizador nunca pareció dotado para la comedia. Tropezó fastidiosamente en *El estilo francés* (1962), donde narraba las peripecias de jovencitas norteamericanas en París, sedientas de un baño de cultura. Sólo en los films de acción directa exhibía sus nervios: *La llama purpúrea* (1955), su primera obra, insinuaba cierto talento al describir la caída de un bombardero en plena selva, *Saddle the Wind* (1958) y *The Wonderful Country* (1959) desmentían esa afirmación. *Casino Royale*, su último film, fue decepcionante. *Newsweek* opinó: "Es la persecución y el asesinato de James Bond representado por una turba de locos asilados". La frase parafraseaba el título de *Marat-Sade*, el oratorio de Peter Weiss. ◆

Manático Sellers: Records.

Films

El dueño del equilibrio

He tenido veinte años. Nadie podrá convencerme de que ése es la más bella de las edades. Paul Nizan.

Masculino-femenino — Tuvo que filmar *A bout de souffle* (Sin aliento, 1960), para comprender de una vez por todas que su destino era un salto en el vacío. Siete años después, Jean-Luc Godard sigue reiterando esa vocación: una docena de films— y el mismo número de vendavales críticos— no ha conseguido convencerlo de las ventajas de la formalidad.

A partir de *Une femme est une femme* (Una mujer es una mujer, 1961), su tercer largo metraje (que Claude Lelouch aprovecharía hasta el hartazgo, un lustro después, aunque se niegue a reconocer la paternidad), la crítica tomó ante Godard una pendularidad extrema: se lo odió o se lo amó sin matices intermedios, muchas veces sin intentar el conocimiento o la sospecha de sus claves. la aproximación a una aventura singular. Lo singular, en todo caso, que duerme en el fondo de cualquier contradicción: si se encuentra el lenguaje, lo contradictorio es el único puente para recuperar la respiración de la vida; si no se lo encuentra, la obra entera se sumerge en la irrisión, sus aciertos no alcanzan para salvarla del abismo de las falsificaciones.

Con esa espada pendiente sobre su

Masculino-Femenino: *De l'amour.*

cabeza, Godard ha entrado en su séptimo año de ganador. A veces cambia de postura para sorprender a los objetos. más que a los críticos, para extrañarles una relación inesperada, un juego de furor y piedad con el universo que su escepticismo no consigue escamotear. En esa persecución, cualquiera puede detectar las señales, el andamiaje de gestos que informan su poética: la necesidad de un lenguaje para enfrentar a la melancolía, los atributos de las cosas para impedir a sangre y fuego que ella lo devore todo.

Para comprender eso, ni siquiera es necesario revisar su filmografía: basta con acercarse a *Masculino-Femenino*, su último film estrenado en Buenos Aires, un lamento de amor pudorosamente disfrazado de "cinéma-verité", un réquiem anticipado para los que vendrán.

El punto de partida es el mismo que empleó para desarrollar *Une femme mariée* (Una mujer casada, 1964): la visión entomológica, el testimonio de la cámara sobre lo que cuenta el insecto, sin comentario. Sólo que acá, como lo pedía Macedonio Fernández, Godard elige trabajar "con toda la realidad", con las dicotomías que polarizan al hombre y con la dialéctica que lo libera, con los fantasmas y con los sólidos que interrumpen la libertad de la luz. Por el camino de este naturalismo exasperado, el film se deja tomar desde la primera secuencia: Paul (Jean-Pierre Léaud) entabla una conversación con Madeleine (Chantal Goya) de mesa a mesa de un café. No han terminado de intercambiar los primeros datos de sus vidas, cuando otra conversación que venía desarrollándose en una mesa vecina los desborda, reclama sin apremio la cámara para que atienda su trivialidad: cuando el hombre de la mesa vecina corta la discusión incorporándose, los dos planos se funden; la mujer que estaba con él lo sigue hasta la puerta del café, y allí lo mata.

El peligro no surge nunca de los datos conocidos por el espectador de una historia. sino del simple gesto que convierte a una piedra en instrumento para el sacrificio. Antes de *Masculino-Femenino*, ni el propio Godard lo había dicho de esa manera. Acaso por eso, ya no es necesario otro dato para inferir que el film es muchos films, que la trampa de valerse del inocente Maupas-

Article de *Primera Plana*, 23 mai 1967, n°230

Source: Hémérothèque du Congrès de la Nation Argentine

The Living Theatre, André Benedetto and Avignon's Off Festival

If the new North American theater of the 1950s was inspired by the post-war European avant-garde, Off-Off-Broadway in turn inspired a whole generation of European artists. the Living Theatre played a key role in circulating experimental methods. In 1964, the company left New York for a nomadic existence in Europe, performing in Italy, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium and France. In New York, the situation had become dire for the company, which was deep in debt after its 14^th^ Street theater closed in 1963.

The North American establishment frowned on radical plays and the Living Theatre's political activism against the Vietnam War. (*The Brig*, the work performed just before the theater closed, denounced military violence and questioned the American army). The troupe left for Europe mainly for political reasons, but also because of its admiration for the European stage. Antonin Artaud (the American translation of *The Theater and Its Double* came out in 1958) was a major reference for the Living Theatre, which sought to create "a theater of contemporary and postmodern cruelty" across the Atlantic. [2]

Between residencies and tours, the artists of the Living Theatre spent over four years in Europe. Audiences came less to see the actors so much as a sort of living legend associated with New York's bohemia, the hippies' communal lifestyle, drugs and sexual freedom. That is also why there was some reluctance when they were invited to the 22^nd Avignon Festival in 1968 by its director, Jean Vilar. The artists already had ties to France. In 1961, Claude Planson invited them for the first time to the Théâtre des Nations. They performed *The Brig* at the Odéon in 1966, then in Caen on the invitation of Jean-Louis Barrault, Bordeaux and Nanterre in 1967. *Paradise Now*, the troupe's new play, coproduced with the Avignon Festival,

deepened the "living theater" method, based on improvisation, ritual dynamics, body work and audience participation. It presented itself as "a work of hope, of joy, that the viewer-participant can attain" in a "post-revolutionary" world. [3]

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8ef51VmIWf8

Paradise Now by the Living Theatre

Source: YouTube

The play's spirit of protest struck a chord in May 1968 France. During the creation of *Paradise* Now in Cefalù that year, Beck and Malina became friends with the French artist Jean-Jacques Lebel. On May 15, 1968, they met again in Paris during the occupation of the Théâtre de l'Odéon. For the demonstrators, it was "the symbol of institutionalized bourgeois culture and the culture industry." [4] Beck and Malina went straight from the Odéon to rehearsals in Avignon, where student and labor union demonstrations created a tense climate. On May 18, recognized figures from the film industry, including Jean-Luc Godard, demanded (and obtained one day later) the closure of the Cannes Festival. On the 20^th, André Benedetto, head of the Théâtre des Carmes in Avignon, publicly approved the occupation of the Odéon and joined the national protest movement.

Vilar decided to postpone the festival for two months, but strikes and the occupation of theaters prevented French companies from rehearsing, so only two companies were scheduled: Maurice Béjart (then based in Brussels) and the Living Theatre. The climate was hardly any better: demonstrators descended upon Avignon calling the festival a "supermarket of culture." Meetings were held in the streets and the CRS, the French security forces, intervened. The Living Theatre's artists were not spared: one actor was arrested for wearing a bathing suit in the street and the conservative fringe of the local population protested against their presence. The banning of the play *La Paillasse aux seins nus*, which the Chêne noir company, headed by Gérard Gelas, was to perform in Villeneuve-lès-Avignon, added fuel to the fire. It triggered a strong reaction from local artists, demonstrators already in Avignon and members of the Living Theatre against the festival's management. Benedetto opened the doors of the Théâtre des Carmes to the protesters, planting the seeds for an alternative festival in Avignon.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VU9sOPS1KjY

Occupation of the Odéon, May 15, 1968

Source: YouTube

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xJHW8xPRuQ

Demonstration at the Avignon Festival in 1968

Source: YouTube

VIDEO

View online: https://fresques.ina.fr/en-scenes/parcours/0019/le-theatre-politique-et-les-festivals.html

Outrage at the Living Théâtre's *Paradise Now* performance at the Avignon Festival

Source: INA

Rising tensions between demonstrators, the festival's directors and security forces brought an end to the Living Theatre performances, prompting demonstrations and polemics in the press until the company's definitive departure. In a letter, Beck explained the reasons underpinning the misunderstanding with the festival's organizers as well as his rejection of the climate of violence reigning in the city. But his brief stay in Avignon left a trace: the idea of alternative theater caught on in France and was quickly associated with the activity that Benedetto had been carrying out for some years at the Théâtre des Carmes.

Benedetto and his company had founded the theater in an old parish church. This is characteristic of alternative theater: the venues are usually located in disaffected buildings repurposed as performance spaces. The first production was staged in 1964 as part of the Avignon Festival, but in 1966 disagreements with the organizers and the publication of a critical manifesto proved divisive. Olivier Neveux claims that Benedetto was inspired by Brecht but was even more radical, along the lines of Marx's vision of a new "materialist, historical, dialectical" theater. In his manifesto, Benedetto "stigmatized the function of theater as it developed in the postwar period. A means of taming and avoiding political issues." [5] Since theater was shirking its responsibilities, it was necessary to create "anti-conciliatory" theater." [6] The Théâtre des Carmes began developing on the festival's fringes, taking advantage of the crowds flowing into the city. This again recalls Off-Broadway: it was outside the margins of traditional theater, but not much. The years after the performance of *Statues* (1966) confirmed the shift towards protest theater, notably with *Napalm, essence solidifiée à l'aide de palmitate de sodium* (*Napalm, Gasoline Solidified with Sodium Palmitate*, 1967), the first French play about the Vietnam War, and *Zone rouge Feux interdits* (*Red Zone No Lights*, 1968).

VIDEO

View online: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k3394177x.r=Zone%20rouge%2C%20feux%20interdits%20Andre%20Benedetto%20%281934-2009%29?rk=42918;4

Cover of the script for *Napalm* by André Benedetto (1968)

Source: Gallica

While a program "outside" the Avignon Festival had existed for several years, it was only after the events of 1968 and the Living Theatre's arrival in Avignon that the word "off" was used. It first appeared in the summer of 1968 in an article that drew comparisons between Benedetto's approach and Off-Off-Broadway.

In the following years, the Festival Off ran parallel to the official festival, now called "In." The program expanded and grew more diverse until the original spirit was completely transformed. The year 1982 marked a turning point for the Off Festival with the creation, on the initiative of actor Alain Léonard, of the association Avignon Public Off (APO), which obtained approval from the organizers of the "In" festival and the blessing of the Ministry of Culture, already under the leadership of Jack Lang. The Festival Off grew, with over 1,500 shows programmed, forcing companies to pay a high price to appear there and find, in the best of cases, buyers who guaranteed them performances during the year. Its success led to a new

definition of the word: a "fringe" or rather "parallel" event alongside the great theater festivals that had burgeoned since the 1980s. This new "festival system" [7] now sets the tone of international theater circulation. "Off" festivals have sprung up just about everywhere. The "Santiago Off" Festival, connected to the Santiago A Mil, one of Latin America's leading festivals, exemplifies the Latin American reappropriation of the idea.

Avignon shows how the use of the term "off" changed after it crossed the Atlantic: in France, it was an explicit reference to Off-Broadway, represented notably by the experimental, anti-establishment spirit of the Living Theatre in the 1960s. Yet in the course of this transfer the concept lost its geographical dimension, one of its main original features. The Festival Off Avignon spread out across the city, especially since it is a seasonal event (nearly 90% of the venues are closed the rest of the year). Moreover, the idea is different in the United States and France. Off-Broadway was a reaction to private theater, which conceives of the performing arts along commercial and capitalist lines. In Europe, public theater was denounced for perpetuating the bourgeoisie's cultural codes and failing to live up to its public service mission. Paradoxically, Off-Broadway depends on government subsidies and private donors to survive, while its French counterpart gradually became more commercial by selling shows.

Off-Corrientes in Buenos Aires: a Latin-American reappropriation

In 2011, an article in the French newspaper *Le Monde* called Buenos Aires a "theater city unlike any other in the world." [8] For the European press, its vibrant scene was linked to the emergence of a new generation of independent artists performing on an alternative circuit, a "blossoming that, after the dictatorship fell in 1983, saw Argentina's capital covered with small venues created by troupes with their own funds in apartments, garages, warehouses and backyards." [9] Today, many of these independent theaters make up the "Off-Corrientes" circuit, a constellation of venues located off Avenue Corrientes, home to large private theaters since the early 20^th century.

Off-Corrientes emerged in the late 1980s and gradually developed in certain Buenos Aires neighborhoods in the 1990s and 2000s. Echoes of Off-Broadway had already resounded at the Di Tella Institute in the 1960s, but the two military dictatorships (1966 to 1973 and 1976 to 1983) stifled the growth of experimental theater, forcing many artists into exile. It was not until after the military regime ended that cultural activity blossomed again and new spaces appeared. They were not directly inspired by Off-Broadway or the Di Tella Institute, which, to the new artists, were echoes of a past generation; they had to blaze their own trail. However, they had several things in common.

The roots of Off-Corrientes can undoubtedly be found in the *movida under*, inspired by spain's *movida*. the *movida under* was a countercultural movement that emerged in about 60 bars, pubs, discos and theaters in downtown Buenos Aires during the democratic transition. They carried on from the underground cultural activity that, despite censorship, developed under the military dictatorship. Their heterogeneous programs, including plays, rock and punk concerts, performances and exhibitions, drew urban youth in search of new forms of socialization. the *movida under* began in 1982 with the opening of Café Einstein and ended in 1989, when two of its emblematic venues, the Centro Parakultural and the Medio Mundo Varieté, closed.

When the Centro Parakultural opened in 1986 in a basement in the Montserrat area, it became the epicenter of the *movida* and underground theater, remaining a touchstone for Off-Corrientes artists in the following years. Before the municipal authorities shut it down in 1989, the center was a breeding ground for many alternative theater artists, including Vivi Tellas, Walter "Batato" Barea, Humberto Tortonese and Alejandro Urdapilleta, the duo Los Melli and Las Gambas al Ajillo, four women who combined acting, dance parodies and music. Its founder, Omar Viola, recalls that the programming was based on "actors in open revolt at the antipodes of conventional testimonial or psychological theater. We were trying to break away from all that. The famous fourth wall did not exist; we worked with the audience." [10] Underground theater used humor and parody to lampoon the idea of "serious" theater, giving actors priority over the text and abolishing the separation between the audience and the stage. The program combined theater, dance, music, performance, the spoken word, the circus arts and the music hall. It was set up in opposition to the moral codes inherited from years of dictatorship, displaced the tradition of political theater and implemented a "festive policy" to accompany Argentina's transition to democracy.

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UNrtFZNHPQ

Arte y democracia: El Parakultural

Source: YouTube

The emergence of Off-Corrientes in Buenos Aires was inseparable from its underground predecessors, which had to fight municipal ordinances to open and establish new forms of artistic circulation. As the effervescence of underground theater began to die down in the 1990s, a host of new venues began to open while keeping some of the previous decade's characteristics: small places in old, disaffected buildings outside the city center where rents were cheaper; programs that featured the up-and-coming generations' new languages and experimentation; and mixed-used spaces for performing, creating and socializing. Several workshops stages opened in the 1980s, paving the way for a new form of production outside the mainstream. Examples include El Exéntrico de la 18, opened in 1985 by actress Cristina Banegas; Sportivo Teatral de Buenos Aires, opened in 1986 by actor/director Ricardo Bartís; and Caliban, opened in 1987 by another actor/director, the 1960s experimental theater icon Norman Briski. They became an indispensable reference for the new independent theater on three counts. First, they benefitted from the rising reputations of the artists who led them. Second, by combining a theater with actors' workshops, they helped disseminate "art theater" outside the mainstream while offering the new generation socialization spaces. Lastly, in the 2000s they wove a subtle continuity between the old model of independent theaters and new, more open places that the post-dictatorship audience aspired to, such as Babilonia, Callejón de los Deseos, Camarín de las Musas and Timbre 4.

Another paradigmatic example is the theater at the Babilonia Discotheque in Abasto. A figurehead of Off-Corrientes, Bablionia opened in 1990 in a former banana warehouse at 3360 Guardia Vieja Street, a few blocks from the one-time wholesale market in the Abasto quarter. It combined a disco, bar and theater. The founders staged the new wave of plays, to which the Parakultural gave visibility, to attract a young audience. However, Babilonia's offer was less improvised than Parakultural's. On the contrary, it was very selective, including established names from independent theater (Eduardo "Tato" Pavlovsky, Laura Yusem, Ruben Schumacher, Javier Margulis) and emerging artists (Daniel Veronese, Alejandro Tantanian, Rafael Spregelburd, Andrea Garrote, among others). It ranged from textual theater to the theater of objects and performances.



Cámara Gesell, play by the El Periférico de Objetos troupe at the Babilonia theater in 1994

Source: Courtesy Emilio Garcia Wehbi

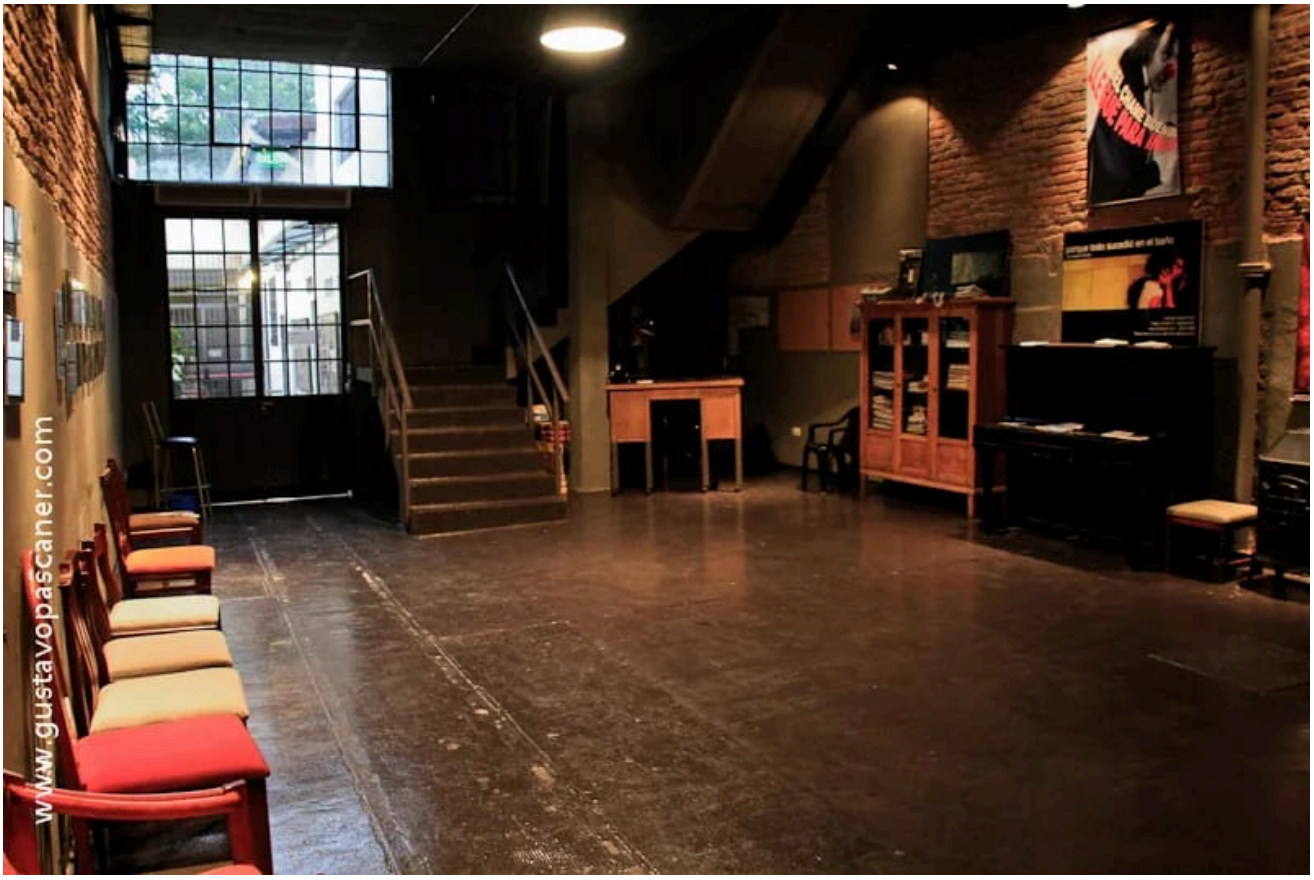
Babilonia was a popular, economic and artistic success. It became a model of theater management and programming for younger generations and, at the same time, a must for foreign programmers, opening new Argentine theater up to the world. Its success encouraged other artists to move into spaces in the Abasto area abandoned after the market, factories and craftsmen's workshops closed. The opening of many small venues near Babilonia, combined with the conversion of the old market into a shopping mall and the neighborhood's renovation, fostered the emergence of a new theater district.

The number of these venues, now called "off-theaters", grew until the 2000s, completely changing the theater landscape of Buenos Aires. The concentration of houses in outlying areas, like Abasto, Villa Crespo and San Telmo, extended well beyond Avenue Corrientes, the historic theater thoroughfare. [11]



The Sportivo Teatral in Buenos Aires (Off-Corrientes)

Source: Courtesy Sportivo Teatral



Timbre 4 in Buenos Aires (Off-Corrientes)

Source: Courtesy Timbre 4

Off-Corrientes normalized underground theater and gradually adapted to the market by spreading through the city. After the national theater Act went into effect in 1997 and the City of Buenos Aires created the Proteatro Institute in 1999, independent spaces benefitted from public funding and tax credits. In return, they agreed to comply with municipal ordinances. Moreover, major local public theaters and international festivals, including the Cadiz Festival in spain, the Kunsten Festival of the Arts in Belgium and the Avignon Festival, which in 1999 held a retrospective of the Periférico de Objetos collective, began inviting Off-Corrientes artists, the crowning achievement of argentine theater abroad. Foreign critics often emphasized the "marginal" and "independent" nature of alternative Argentine theater, reigniting the legend that originated with Off-Broadway. [12] Public aid fell short of funding the theaters and argentine cultural policy, highly dependent on the will of the government in power. There was no standing budget. Public funding for independent theater began plummeting in 2015, causing several venues to close, spurring the sector to take action [13] and leading actors to diversify their projects and look for self-funding strategies. This may also be why Off-Corrientes, despite its diversity and international success, still has a certain spirit of experimentation inherited from independent theater. It also demonstrates the ability of Off-Corrientes to overcome economic challenges and neoliberal cultural management, making it a model for other Latin American and European cities. In Madrid, for example, the number of alternative theaters in the Lavapiés and Malasaña neighborhoods has been rising since 2009, a pattern similar to the one that appeared in Buenos Aires years before. [14]

VIDEO

View online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZpPI-oTVmA

Clip from the Spanish documentary *Teatro ¿Off?*

Source: YouTube

The Off-Corrientes scene in Buenos Aires bears numerous social and geographical similarities to Off-Broadway: the primordial importance of the venues (either because of their "unconventional" character or their location in outlying and neglected areas); an approach opposed to the codes of traditional theater; and the accompaniment of a socially and politically active countercultural movement deeply committed to issues other than theater (for example, it breathed new life into gay activism). Off-Corrientes was far from a passing fad associated with the return of individual freedoms in the post-dictatorship period. Like Off-Broadway, it became a real circuit, part of the pre-existing scene and a training ground for a whole generation. Like Off-Broadway in the 1960s, Off-Corrientes in the 1980s and 1990s had a fraught relationship with the authorities, which led to theater closings, police raids and the obligation to comply with standards that were unrealistic for organizations on a shoestring budget. Paradoxically, these alternative venues burnished the cultural reputation of cities as they enacted urban renewal programs. They even spurred private real estate speculation once the neighborhoods where they were located began gentrifying. This happened in New York's East Village [7] and it is happening today in the Villa Crespo and Almagro neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, where the Abasto area is located.

The idea of alternative theater has three dimensions: the urban dimension, because it comprises a constellation of small venues packed close to one another, often in the same neighborhood; the political dimension, independence being one of the actors' greatest demands; and the aesthetic dimension, which involves seeking languages that are innovative, hybrid or have been abandoned by major private and public theaters. Research into transatlantic cultural transfers shows that, far from being separate phenomena, the various forms of alternative theater are often shaped by exchanges and reappropriations of concepts and practices in different contexts. This perspective allows us to identify not so much the differences (which distinguish Off-Broadway from the Avignon Off Festival, for example) as the similarities: artists and artists' collectives have forged transatlantic ties; they have developed similar mechanisms to deal with political and budgetary constraints; local cultural promoters use the same strategies to capitalize on the power of a dissident theater once it has become somewhat successful. And the story is not over. recent examples show that the concept of alternative theater is alive and well. Depending on the sociopolitical context, it can become a promotional "brand" on the theater market (pessimistic version) or continue to politically and artistically challenge the free-market mentality and the stifling institutionalization of cultural policies (optimistic version).

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