

Preface

This book captures the erotically charged, heart-thumping excitement of the WOW Café Theatre, aka WOW, since 1980, when it first arrived on the cultural scene in New York City's East Village. The book's title is taken from a play, *The Lady Dick*, and a theater company, the Five Lesbian Brothers, as examples of productive neologisms that could only be imagined at WOW, shifting old paradigms to enable alternative visions. As a whole this project is in homage to all the women of WOW who created those visions and have sustained the theater over the years. Against formidable odds, they keep it going.

The story of WOW's evolution clearly demonstrates how the conditions and dynamics of WOW are inextricably linked to the significant and influential aesthetic developed there. Since first crossing WOW's threshold in 1984, I have stood in awe of work made by such women as Jen Abrams, Maureen Angelos, Karen Campbell, Susana Cook, Karen Crumley, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, the Five Lesbian Brothers, Alice Forrester, Heidi Griffiths, Peg Healey, Holly Hughes, Lisa Kron, Deb Margolin, the Millies, Cheryl Moch, Claire Olivia Moed, Madeleine Olnek, Reno, Peggy Shaw, Sharon Jane Smith, the Split Britches Company, Kate Stafford, Alina Troyano (aka Carmelita Tropicana), Lois Weaver, Susan Young, and so many others. To crib from a remark Claire Moed made on her first encounter with WOW, I, too, became a different person because of this work.

I began collecting material for this book in 1985 with the understanding that not only had WOW come into being at a turning point in the women's movement and feminist critical thought, but it is representative of this historical juncture. Although I was convinced that the theater itself was a central player in the work emerging from it, I had little understanding of the challenge writing this book would present. WOW artists tell of many a scholar arriving

at the theater over the years with plans to document its history. The reason it hasn't happened until now, however, has more to do with the nature of the beast than any lack of interest. Providing a history of WOW is slippery business, even when one is simply trying to record the series of public events.

The WOW Café Theatre is a hugely amorphous entity. The absence of staff and infrastructure is a hallmark of its anarchic approach, and hence record keeping has never been part of its *modus operandi*. Further complicating WOW's purposeful disorganization is the fact that the majority of WOW productions were not reviewed. This is due in part to WOW's status as "community" (as opposed to "professional") theater. Extant flyers and programs list the month and days of particular events but not the year. In the early 1990s I rifled through materials that had been tossed into boxes at the Lesbian Herstory Archives, then located in archive cofounder Joan Nestle's apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Years later I revisited the archives when it had moved to a large Brooklyn brownstone and acquired even more boxes of WOW material. These boxes held whatever individual WOW participants had had the forethought to contribute to the archive.

Another collection housed at WOW, informally referred to as "the WOW archives," helped to fill in the gaps. Neither collection is complete, however. Both are made up of a hodgepodge of press releases, flyers, programs, videotapes of productions, scripts, and newspaper clippings. Over the years I have attempted to track down accurate information from the artists and producers themselves, but because of the collective's in-flux membership, it has not always been possible to locate individuals. Even when located, WOW participants did not always respond to my requests for information. This is very much in keeping with WOW's foundational ethos and, paradoxically, part of the reason why the theater has endured for three decades. The personal collections of several individuals have been immensely helpful during this project, and I'm grateful to those who made them available to me, particularly Pamela Camhe, Jimmy Camicia, Alice Forrester, Jordy Mark, Peggy Shaw, and Lois Weaver.

The appendix at the back of the book captures the breadth of work produced at WOW since its inception in 1980. The purpose of including this production history is to acknowledge as many WOW artists as possible and to spark interest in further study. One founding member of WOW has said that hundreds of shows were presented during the theater's storefront years (1982–85), at 330 E. Eleventh Street, before the collective moved to its current location at 59–61 E. Fourth Street. Much of the documentation is lost, how-

ever, and the production history does not include shows that ran for a single night. There were dozens of such instances, sometimes two different shows a night, during what one WOW member has described as “hit-and-run theater.” In the late 1980s WOW artist Susan Young graciously lent her expertise to the effort of preparing an initial list of productions. I expanded that document in the 1990s, and a current member of the collective, Parker Pracjek, has fleshed it out further. In the hope of getting each production in the correct time period, shows are listed in two-year spans rather than by theater season.

At some point the WOW collective began to keep a notebook in which the house manager would record the name of the show, the show’s producer, and the total of box-office receipts handed over to the producer each night. Although it cannot be assumed that this practice was followed consistently, these notebooks were saved over the years. And even though they are not organized by year, they were an invaluable source for compiling WOW’s production history—sometimes the only remaining documentation of a production’s existence. It is almost always the case that a show’s producer was also its creator, although it is of course possible that only the producer’s name was listed in the production history and that of the writer, performance artist, or choreographer is missing. In short, there are undoubtedly omissions in the production history I have compiled, and for this I apologize. As new information surfaces, it will be posted on WOW’s Web site (<http://www.wowcafe.org>).

During most of the theater’s existence, I have lived in other parts of the United States. With the exception of my discussion of WOW’s inaugural festivals in 1980 and 1981, I have limited this book to productions I personally attended, including influential work that predated WOW in the 1970s by the playwright Charles Ludlam and the troupe of drag queens known as Hot Peaches. In addition to archival material, I have relied on dozens of interviews I have conducted with members of WOW’s collective, past and present. I have also interviewed women who attended WOW productions in the early years, such as the poets and novelists Jewelle Gomez and Eileen Myles, who have generously shared their recollections and perspectives. Jen Abrams, a current WOW member, was enormously helpful in responding to a variety of questions such as those related to WOW’s struggle to hang onto the performance space it had occupied for more than two decades. Quotations from unpublished interviews and plays are cited in the notes. Several newspaper articles and reviews were obtained in clipped and copied form, often missing publication data, particularly page numbers, which I tracked down when possible.

I am indebted to the many reviewers who wrote with passion about WOW's founding festivals for a number of publications, particularly the playwright Jane Chambers and the journalist Barbara Baracks, along with several writers who covered the first two WOW festivals for *Womanews*. Without this documentation the festivals would be mostly lost to cultural memory. In the absence of the festivals, much of what is important about the WOW Café Theatre as an enabling enterprise for women at a turning point in feminist cultural production would be misunderstood. This book is also indebted to the many writers who have repeatedly turned their attention to WOW's work over the years, C. Carr, Jill Dolan, Alisa Solomon, and Laurie Stone among them. Their thoughtful and insightful analysis has enriched this endeavor immeasurably.

Capturing the "there" that is WOW has been a process spanning twenty-five years. Many people in my personal and professional life have made this process possible. My sister Babs Davy was an active member of the WOW collective from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, and she provided a sense of continuity for the project that I would have otherwise missed. Babs arrived at WOW with no training in theater whatsoever and made her debut with a couple of lines in Lisa Kron's 1987 production of *Paradykes Alley*. Like so many women, Babs went on to appear in many other WOW productions and to create her own work. She is a founding member of the Five Lesbian Brothers, a troupe that emerged directly from WOW. When Babs appears onstage, it always catches me a bit off guard, and her work never fails to take my breath away.

Friends, lovers, and family members have been a source of inestimable support throughout this endeavor. I am grateful for the brainpower and so-lace provided during the early years of this project by Hilary Harris, Mimi McGurl, Lisa Merrill, Ruth Sternglantz, and especially Jane Fisher, the best researcher ever. I am equally grateful to friends and colleagues who agreed to read the book proposal or chapters and provided helpful feedback, including Barbara Boyce, Clare Davidson, Betsy Farrell, Gail Leondar-Wright, Sheila Moeschen, Janelle Reinelt, Marc Stern, Sara Warner, Christine R. Williams, and especially Cyrus Veaser. I will never be able to thank Peggy Shaw enough for her prompt, unfailing assistance in helping me to track down the contact information for early WOW participants. Amy Parker is a most supportive friend who served as my local editor during the years I lived in Cambridge. The knowledge and keen insights she brought to careful readings have surely made the book stronger.

Bentley University, where I served as Dean of Arts and Sciences from 2002 to 2009, is a visionary place. I was fortunate to work with a great number of stellar colleagues there, all of whom mean a lot to me and were supportive in more ways than they will ever know. Lynne Durkin, as both my friend and associate dean at Bentley, has been a rock, personifying patience and making all things possible. She is a scholar and gentlewoman whose judgment I trust absolutely and to whom I owe the deepest debt of gratitude. Two women who served as administrative assistants in the dean's office at Bentley, Martha Keating and Kathryn Nettles, also deserve many thanks. As this book goes to press, I serve the University of Michigan-Dearborn as Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. My wonderful assistant there, Debbie Parker, was enormously helpful during the final stages of preparing the manuscript.

My dear friend Jill Dolan discovered the WOW Café Theatre with me in 1984. For her I reserve a special note of appreciation, not only for her sage advice and skillful editing over the years, but also for her many upbeat, encouraging e-mail messages at those times during the writing process when I most needed encouragement. Jill's confidence in this project kept me going.

My son, Isaac-Davy Aronson, read various versions of different chapters over the years. As a writer in his own right and as someone who has seen all the work of the Five Lesbian Brothers, Isaac provided many insightful comments and thoughtful editing, which was particularly helpful as I struggled for months with chapter 6, "Challenging Whiteness." When he thought I had finally nailed it, dancing in the streets commenced. Isaac probably doesn't remember a time when I wasn't working on this book. His unflagging interest, patience, and encouragement constantly amaze me, and his love is a source of energy and inspiration. In my life, he is joy.

Because the work that produced this volume has spanned almost three decades, I regret that I have surely forgotten some of those who helpfully participated in this process. In recompense, and in the ever generous spirit of WOW, I hereby dub as honorary "WOW girls" all who contributed to making this book happen. It is my hope that this marks only the start of reexamining an organization and multiple bodies of work that are well worth further consideration. As indicated by the extensive production history detailed in the appendix, there is so much more to be explored. In addition to making a contribution to extant knowledge of WOW and its cultural production, I hope this book will inspire another generation of scholars to dig in. It is a project with larger implications that speak to the historical and continuing relevance of the WOW Café Theatre.