

Preface

I'm not interested in the sixties. I'm not interested in any of these nostalgic eras they're reviving. . . . That's just people trying, so desperately, to find some—*(Laughs lightly.)* “meaning for their own time.”

—“Carla,” in Robert Patrick's *Kennedy's Children*

For as long as I can recall having an opinion on the subject, the theaters that have seemed most alive to me—the most exciting to be at or a part of—have been those generally regarded as “illegitimate” by the established apparatus of press, funding bodies, and professional theatrical institutions. Basement theaters. Café theaters. Hole-in-the-wall theaters. Theaters thriving on rough edges, raw passion, and a fierce sense of the immediacy and “liveness” of both the stage event itself and of the audience. A church gymnasium; a disused warehouse; the underground arches beneath a railway station: these are the performance spaces where I have been thrilled and moved far more often than I have been in the relatively comfortable, controlled spaces of the professional theater. My own first experiences as a director—in a tiny black-box space converted from a reading room in the University of Bristol's students' union, where the crammed-in audience seemed almost to sit on top of the stage, and the ceiling was so low that the barn-doors on the lights could scrape the tops of actors' heads—made most of the “real” theaters I have worked in since seem lacking in atmosphere by comparison.

For some years, I harbored these thoughts rather guiltily, believing that I must, at heart, be some kind of rank amateur to feel this way. During my doctoral research on the work of Sam Shepard, however (cf. Bottoms 1998a), I became fascinated by his background in the off-off-Broadway movement of the 1960s—a movement that seemed to have been largely airbrushed out of the history books, but which had thrived in precisely the kinds of spaces that interested me, and which, far from being merely some amateur or student affair, had produced an explosion of genuinely innovative theater. My research for this book has thus been an attempt to explore and document a movement that offered real alternatives to institutionalized professionalism. In

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today's theater scene, often intent on recycling familiar formulas—whether big-money commercialism, subsidized classicism, or purportedly avant-garde gimmickry—a new injection of anarchic, underground energy is devoutly to be wished for.

Excavating the movement's history proved no simple task, since so little of critical or historical substance has previously been published on the subject. Albert Poland and Bruce Mailman's *The Off-Off-Broadway Book* (1972) remains the most useful source, but is mostly comprised of play-texts, and its "factual" details are often inaccurate. My work has involved dredging used bookstores for long-out-of-print play collections, wading through avalanches of archived newspaper clippings, and tracking down playwrights, directors, and actors to request interviews and, where possible, beg for copies of unpublished scripts. The surviving documentation, moreover, covers only a fraction of what occurred on off-off-Broadway's ad hoc stages, some of which mounted new plays every week or two, for years. Much of what was instantly forgotten probably deserved no better fate, but much that was of value has also, undoubtedly, been lost forever: the creators of off-off-Broadway were always more concerned with what was happening *now*, in the present moment (one of the central imperatives of the 1960s counterculture), than with documenting events for posterity. Playwright H. M. Koutoukas claims he went as far as shredding all copies of some of his plays after opening night, partly to prevent script piracy, but also partly to ensure the ephemerality of performances that had been designed to "hit the air" and then vanish forever. The venues themselves were only slightly more concerned with recording their achievements: the archives of the period held by La Mama and Judson Church consist of clipped-out *Village Voice* reviews, typed or hand-printed programs and posters, scratchy photographs, and letters recording the day-to-day business of trying to keep the venues afloat. The most vivid accounts of the performances themselves are to be found in the memories of those who were there, but, as many of them are quick to point out, time can play tricks on the memory.

In short, all that is really left of Off-Off-Broadway is fragments—fragments that require a good deal of creative interpretation if one is to assemble them into a coherent narrative. The notion of writing anything "objective," let alone "definitive" on the subject seems nonsensical: there was and is no one set of truths about off-off-Broadway to uncover, since the entire scene was always more a matter of competing perceptions than of a singular, concrete reality. For this reason, my ironic working title for this book was *What Happened*, and although my publishers—for sound marketing reasons—suggested that I go

with something snappier, the impishness of my original choice still appeals. Gertrude Stein's short play *What Happened* (1913), which became the basis for a landmark production by the Judson Poets' Theater (1963), uses rhythmically repetitive, self-referential language to capture a subjective impression of endlessly circling chatter, rather than attempting in any way to record the representational "truth" of the dinner party Stein was apparently inspired by. Conversely, though, *What Happened* also appealed as a title because it can be taken as a direct statement, perhaps even a challenge: for the off-off-Broadway movement *did* happen, and *can* be narrativized, and it is long past time that its significance was acknowledged.

Unfortunately, even in a book of this scale, it is possible only to sketch out an initial mapping of "what happened." For example, in seeking to set out an intertwined history of the venues and companies involved in the movement, I have often had to rein in my own impulse to reflect at length on individual works. Few of the plays and performances discussed in this book are covered in anything like the detail they deserve, and—while I have attempted to cover most of the major "landmarks" of the movement's development—the materials I focus on often say as much about my own critical preoccupations as they do about their renown at the time. Much more research could, and I hope will, be done, by other scholars with different concerns. But what follows is, at least, a start.

Off-off-Broadway was a theater movement founded on collaborative creation, and this book too is very much a group effort. I owe an enormous debt to the many people who have shared their time and expertise with me. I am grateful to my interviewees, in particular, for providing insights that none of the existing documentation could have offered: a full list of their names, and of when and where we met, is provided in appendix B. (Please note that quotations in the text from these artists that are otherwise unattributed to bibliographic sources come from these interviews.). Further thanks are due to the following "OOBniks" for consenting to read and comment on chapters in progress: Tony Barsha, Hal Borske, Jerry Cunliffe, Paul Foster, Walter Hadler, Robert Heide, Lawrence Kornfeld, H. M. Koutoukas, Murray Mednick, Tom O'Horgan, Robert Patrick, John Vaccaro, and Doric Wilson. Further invaluable advice has also been provided by friends and colleagues including Greg Giesekam, Francis Hagan, Katherine Morley, and, especially, Sarah Kornfeld.

My most important collaboration of all has been with Michael Smith, the chief theater critic for the *Village Voice* throughout the period discussed in

this book, whose reviews—clear-sighted, provocative, personal—I have come to appreciate as my own set of eyes on what actually happened, in performance, off-off-Broadway. Latterly, via e-mail, Michael has also stepped in as an indispensable critic and editor of my writing. Long before this personal contact was established, however, I had been struck by the frequency with which his *Voice* reports resonated with, and indeed helped crystallize, my own accumulated impressions of the plays and players involved. If I quote him frequently, it is because I trust him and because, still more importantly, he was trusted by the artists themselves. “He loved the theatre as much as we did,” notes playwright Megan Terry: “he let people know where to come and what was happening. When there was a breakthrough, he would be the first to proclaim it” (Savran 1988, 244). Smith’s unapologetically subjective reviewing style consciously eschewed the conventional notion that the critic’s function is to provide a “service” to an anonymous public, by setting oneself up in judgment over what is or is not worth seeing. Instead, always acknowledging his own preferences and interests, he sought to speak to and for the creative community of which he was a part—as a playwright, as a director, and as “key grip” for his longtime lover, lighting designer Johnny Dodd. He sought to generate debate rather than to close it down, and proved willing to open himself up to criticism in the process: “I got mocked sometimes for writing about myself,” he notes, “but it was a deliberate choice. I love the theater and wanted to be a friend of the theater and an advocate of the theater and keep the theater alive and healthy and wonderful. That was my aim—not to be right all the time.” If there is a better goal for a theater critic to aspire to, I don’t know what it is.

During my research, I have also become aware that many librarians and archivists see their function in very similar terms: to keep the future of theater bright by keeping its memory alive. My thanks go especially to Chris Karatnytsky and her colleagues at the Billy Rose Theatre Collection of the New York Public Library, to Ozzie Rodriguez at the La Mama archive, to Amy Wilson and Judson Memorial Church, and to Martha Coigney of the International Theatre Institute. Finally, I am profoundly grateful to my own immediate community here in Glasgow—to the actors and directors who collaborated with me in bringing so many of the plays discussed in this book back to life in three dimensions, and to the students who sat my courses on this subject, and who fed back to me, I am sure, many more insights than I imparted to them. And then of course there is Paula, who has put up with everything, and fed me with joy.