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WOW Café Theater Unveils 30th Anniversary Festival After Three Decades, Fierce Performers Prove the Show Will Go On

By Esther Zinn

WOW Café Theater, a collective for female and trans performance artists, strutted its stuff during its Pearl festival in May by celebrating thirty years of producing risk-taking, genre-defying theatre during the entire month of May 2010. Featuring more than twenty performances and fifty artists spanning a broad spectrum of music, dance, and multi-media, the Pearl festival was arguably the biggest and longest running theatrical event for women in New York during this summer, made possible by a generous grant from the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council.

The theater itself was purchased from The City of New York for \$1. The caveat presented by the city, however, was that WOW itself would be made responsible for raising \$125,000 to renovate the building and bring it up to code. A formidable challenge, but one steadily accomplished by the diligent and dedicated members of WOW's collective, who have so far worked to raise 3/4 of the total to date.

WOW fosters the empowerment of women and transgendered persons of all ages and backgrounds through performing arts and operates on a sweat-equity system, guided by a structure of collective governance, and has had the privilege of showcasing influential artists such as **Holly Hughes** throughout the course of its rich history.

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Photo: KS Stevens

WOW's recent Pearl festival illuminated a refreshing selection of ground-breaking performers and producers with a large variety of unique work varying in length and genre. **Kirin Stevens** produced "Third Time's a Charm," a witty short play centering around two women at coffee who can't seem to agree on whether or not they're actually on a date.

"I write dramedies," said Stevens. I write about serious topics with a sense of humor as well as strict dramas... I write putting my audiences first. I never forget that behind all the great stories, arcs, actors, etc, if I don't enchant an audience, then I've written a play just for me, and that just doesn't work."

Steven's piece was followed by **Kimberlea Kressal's**, "Lesbian Love Octagon: A Musical Comedy About Dyke Drama." Kressal's hilarious, campy musical short engaged the audience with the misadventures of a young woman coping with the breaking up with her girlfriend, Darla, as she navigates bad online dating and which dildos to purchase at the local toy shop afterwards in an effort to stave off those cold, lonely nights.

"I think that by taking a highly commercialized genre of theatre and infusing it with stories from a marginalized community, stories that have been traditionally ignored and dismissed, we are creating fun radical theatre," said Kressal.



Photo: Kimberlea Kressal



Photo: BJ Watkins

Seren Divine's "Wordsmiths" revolved around the usage of language, with many pieces based upon fostering dialogue and thought upon the principles of social justice, involving a wide range of artists who specialized in spoken word and music.

"My work is for any audience. My message is for every audience...I most enjoy empowering dissenting voices, alarming voices, social Justice voices. And by 'voice' I mean any communication be it visual, movement, written or other," said Divine. When asked about what makes her work stand apart, she said, "My work...hard to say. Art is so subjective...also, not too many people make truly erotic erotica. I have been told that I do. And my stage presence is apparently engaging."

In addition to the stage pieces, an out of the ordinary clowning workshop was offered by queer, non-binary performance artist **Johnny Blazes**, who encouraged participants to play with the identities that exist within themselves, "no big shoes or slapstick required." Blazes enjoys combining many types performance, often wowing audiences with drag burlesque and opera singing.

"My clown workshops are always very character-based, and since I am interested in helping people build multi-dimensional, believable characters, I have students focus on the identity markers

of their characters: the character's age, gender, race, wealth, social status, health, and so on," said Blazes. "So in a sense, my workshops have a very "queer" feeling to them—namely that I am encouraging people to create an identity that they must examine at every level."

Johnny finds her clowning a radical response to a type of performance underrepresented by women and queer individuals. Said Johnny, "Clowning is traditionally a male-dominated, heterosexual space. I love that my work is a direct answer to that: teaching workshops in spaces like WOW, run entirely by women and transpeople, teaching people to create characters that use gender stereotypes very consciously, with an eye towards undermining them rather than enforcing them."

The performer, who travels from Boston as a guest performer for WOW, doesn't mind the commute. "As an out-of-town guest I was really amazed and touched at how willing the collective members were to pitch in and help me realize my goals," Blazes said. "It made me feel valued as a performer and a teacher."

Johnny Blazes often performs as part of *The Giddy Multitude Vaudeville Company*, hosted by performer **Nicolette Dixon**. The Giddy Multitude featured several burlesque and circus acts under the performing title, "Extended Play."

"As a performer, I feel my work crosses



Photo: Johnny Blazes

genres, drawing from clowning, burlesque, storytelling, and aerial arts to create a unique theatrical experience," said Dixon. "I loved knowing that I was a part of a celebration of an important achievement in queer theatre, and a notable moment in history. WOW has been a launching pad for many brilliant and influential artists, and as a member, is an artistic home where I've found a supportive community in which to create the kind of art and performance that is important to me."

Co-producers **Agent N** and **JZ Bich** are the brilliant creative duo that collectively produced Pearl's edition of *Hypergender*, a queer burlesque show, now running for 3 years. The Pearl anniversary saw double *Hypergender* feature, *Les-bolesque* and *Disaporic Dreams*, and was a smash hit with audiences, earning them an editor's pick in **GO Magazine**.



Photo: Nicolette Dixon