

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

### 1. Name of Property

historic name Caffe Cino **multiple property listing:** no

other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. Location

street & number 31 Cornelia St  not for publication

city or town New York  vicinity

state New York code NY county New York code 061 zip code 10014

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I certify that this  nomination  request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally.  See continuation sheet for additional comments.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet for additional comments.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

### 4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register.  
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the  
National Register.  
 See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the  
National Register.

removed from the National  
Register.

other, (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Caffe Cino**

Name of Property

**New York, New York**

County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**

(Check as many boxes as apply)

private

public-local

public-State

public-Federal

**Category of Property**

(Check only one box)

building(s)

district

site

structure

object

**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing

Noncontributing

\_\_\_\_\_ 1 \_\_\_\_\_ buildings

\_\_\_\_\_ sites

\_\_\_\_\_ structures

\_\_\_\_\_ objects

\_\_\_\_\_ 1 \_\_\_\_\_ 0 \_\_\_\_\_ Total

**Name of related multiple property listing**

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

**Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register**

2 (South Village Historic District)

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater

COMMERCE/restaurant

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions)

Vacant

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**

(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE VICTORIAN/Italianate

**Materials**

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation stone

walls brick

roof

other

**Narrative Description**

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Caffe Cino**

Name of Property

**New York, New York**

County and State

**8 Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield, information important in prehistory or history.

**Criteria considerations**

(mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** removed from its original location.
- C** a birthplace or grave.
- D** a cemetery.
- E** a reconstructed building, object or structure.
- F** a commemorative property.
- G** less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

**Narrative Statement of Significance**

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

**Bibliography**

(cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

- Performing Arts
- Social History
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

**Period of Significance**

December 1958-March 1968

**Significant Dates**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

\_\_\_\_\_

**Cultural Affiliation**

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Architect/Builder**

Benjamin Warner

**Primary location of additional data**

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

\_\_\_\_\_

**Caffe Cino**

Name of Property

**New York, New York**

County and State

**10. Geographical Data**

**Acreage of property**     Less than one acre

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1	18		
	<i>Zone</i>	<i>Easting</i>	<i>Northing</i>
2			

3			
	<i>Zone</i>	<i>Easting</i>	<i>Northing</i>
4			

See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title     Amanda Davis                      Contact Kathleen LaFrank, NR Coordinator, NYSHPO 518-268-2165

organization     NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project                      date     July 2017

street & number     \_\_\_\_\_                      telephone     \_\_\_\_\_

city or town     \_\_\_\_\_                      state     \_\_\_\_\_                      zip code     \_\_\_\_\_

**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets**

**Maps**

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

**Photographs**

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name     \_\_\_\_\_

street & number     \_\_\_\_\_                      telephone     \_\_\_\_\_

city or town     \_\_\_\_\_                      state     \_\_\_\_\_                      zip code     \_\_\_\_\_

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.470 *et seq.*)

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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The building that housed Caffe Cino is located at 31 Cornelia Street, between Bleecker and West 4<sup>th</sup> Streets, in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City, New York County. The building is on the northern side of the street and occupies the front of the lot. It was constructed in 1877 as a four-story, brick, pre-law tenement and store in the Italianate style.<sup>1</sup> It was built by Benjamin Warner for Michael Maloney (who had owned the property since 1867) and it replaced a c. 1833 building. There is a second building at the rear of the lot that is not visible from the street. The rear building (31 rear Cornelia Street) appears to have been built by 1843, though it has had later alterations.<sup>2</sup> Caffe Cino is a contributing element within the South Village Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2014.<sup>3</sup> The rear building, although unrelated to Caffe Cino, is also a contributing building in the South Village Historic District. This nomination documents Caffe Cino for its individual significance in the areas of performing arts and social history as the location of Caffe Cino between December 1958 and March 1968.

Caffe Cino is located in a neighborhood that primarily consists of residential buildings with commercial ground floors. The street itself is one-block long and nestled between two main thoroughfares: Bleecker Street to the southwest and West 4<sup>th</sup> Street to the northeast. Sixth Avenue lies to the east, just around the corner from Cornelia Street. Buildings on the Cornelia Street block were constructed between the second quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The area is primarily low-rise, with most structures under six stories tall. To the southwest of 31 Cornelia Street is a one-story brick building (1913) with a three-story brick building (c. 1833 or 1843) in the rear; a three-story and raised basement brick rowhouse (c. 1854); and a corner four-story brick rowhouse (c. 1829; fourth story c. 1930) with a commercial ground floor that faces Bleecker Street and a two-story extension (c. 1921; second story c. 1930) that faces Cornelia Street. To the northeast of 31 Cornelia Street are two six-story brick and stone tenements (c. 1903), one with a commercial ground floor and the other with a ground floor converted into apartments (1958); a two-story brick stable, now a single-family dwelling (c. 1912); a three-story and raised basement brick rowhouse (1843-45); a three-story brick dwelling (1906), now converted to condominiums (1984); a four-story brick tenement (c. 1853); a pair of five-story brick tenements, one with a stucco ground floor (1878 and 1876), with five- and two-story brick buildings in the rear; a five-story stucco multiple dwelling with a commercial ground floor (two buildings combined 1944); a five-story and raised basement brick tenement (c. 1890); and a five-story brick tenement (1890-91) at the corner of Cornelia and West 4<sup>th</sup> streets. Across the street, on the south side of Cornelia Street, is a twelve-story brick and stone apartment building (c. 1907) at the corner of Sixth Avenue, with a one-story brick rear extension facing Cornelia Street; a five-story brick tenement with a commercial ground floor (1881-82); a

<sup>1</sup> A Pre-law tenement refers to one constructed before the Tenement House Act of 1879 and lacking the requirements for light and air mandated by that law.

<sup>2</sup> New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II Designation Report* (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The rear building was not mentioned in the nomination, possibly because it was not visible from the street. While it is contributing to the South Park district, it has no relation to Caffe Chino and is not counted in this nomination.

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vacant lot; a row of five-story brick tenements with commercial ground floors (1871); a row of five-story brick and stone tenements (1877 and 1873); a four-story brick multiple dwelling and a four-story brick building in the rear (c. 1824 or 1839); a five-story brick tenement with a commercial ground floor (1882); a four-story brick multiple dwelling (redesigned 1958-60); and a one-story commercial building (1941) at the corner of Bleecker.

The building at 31 Cornelia Street was built for mixed use, with a commercial space on the first floor and apartments above. The brick building is three bays wide and four stories tall. The upper stories feature double-hung, one-over-one wood-frame windows, wide, flat stone lintels and sills, and a bracketed and paneled wood cornice. A metal fire escape extends down the center of the façade and a projecting restaurant sign is attached to the building by a metal rod. The rear elevation is marked by regular fenestration on each floor, three windows on the upper floors and two windows and a side entrance on the ground level. Rear windows are wood, double-hung sash (possibly replaced), slightly recessed in wood frames, and have flat stone lintels. A two-bay-wide fire escape descends the elevation, as do exterior vents and pipes. The ground floor door is metal and is surmounted by a wood transom with glass panes.

The building was constructed with a commercial space on the first floor and its current configuration dates to the period of significance. It consists of two parts: a separate side bay entrance that provides access to the upper apartments and to a hallway leading to the building at the rear of the property and a commercial space characterized by two storefront windows flanking a center entrance. The entire storefront is surmounted by a wood cornice with end brackets. The glass and wood panel door to the apartments is recessed within an opening flanked by wide wood pilasters and surmounted by a glass transom. Two stone steps access the door.

The storefront itself retains its general form and configuration, but parts of it are now covered in narrow vertical board wood paneling. The recessed center entrance was originally flanked by two cast-iron pilasters (visible to the northeast of the storefront door in historic photos). Although these are now covered, it is likely that they are still present behind the paneling. A single wood and glass door (with no transom) has replaced the paired wood and glass doors with transom (the glass of which was removed during the Cino era to accommodate an air-conditioning unit). Paired wood casement windows and a single wood casement window, all with eight panes of glass, flank the storefront entrance. During the period of significance, these windows were single pane glass with transoms (the transom level has since been filled in to provide an enclosed interior space for an HVAC system). Also in the Cino era, a second air-conditioning unit was installed at the top of the northeastern bay. Around 1966, the windows were covered with posters and artwork so that they were no longer visible from the street; this was meant to deter the attention of police officers as the Cino's reputation as a gay hangout grew and as the City of New York began to crack down on coffeehouses staging plays without a cabaret license (see item 8). Above the storefront is a non-historic fixed fabric awning. There is also a roll-down metal security gate.

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Spotlights originally located under the cornice are no longer extant; however, other spotlights have replaced them.

### Interior

The interior commercial space was small, narrow, non-descript and open, and it retains this character today. The space is about eighteen feet wide and thirty feet deep. During the period of significance, the space was defined by an exposed brick wall, a plaster wall covered in cork, and wood floors. During the period of significance, the ceiling was originally decorative pressed metal ceiling. At some point before 1965, Joe Cino added a fireproof ceiling below the metal that also held lighting. After the 1965 fire, the ceiling was plain white plaster.

Today, there is a small vestibule (defined by three paneled walls: two with wood-framed windows and one with a wood and glass door) at the main entrance within the front room, which is the largest and major public space; a non-historic wall and open doorway separates the front room from the bathroom and service area, and finally the kitchen, which is delineated by a non-historic angled wall that has a doorway with a swinging door. The exposed brick northeast wall that is visible in historic photos of the Caffe Cino is still there, but it has been concealed by plaster. In order to conceal mechanicals added after the period of significance, the southwest wall between the built-in bar and the rear wall extends approximately one foot from the historic wall, which in the Caffe Cino era was plaster and covered in cork. Throughout the Cino's history, artwork and posters hung on the walls. The metal ceiling also survives; however, it is concealed by a non-historic drop ceiling that is bordered by metal coves around the sides (these conceal an HVAC system). The drop ceiling appears to sit at a similar height to the plain plaster ceiling that was installed by Joe Cino after the 1965 fire (a new lighting system that hung from the ceiling was also installed at this time). Before the fire, Joe Cino had installed a lighting system along with a fireproof ceiling, which limited the damage to the ground floor commercial space. The public space has a wood wainscot to the chair rail and plaster above. The upper part of the wall is decorated with alternating sconces and mirrors. Despite changes to the interior finishes, the main character of the space is small, narrow, and open, as it was during the period of significance.

Other than the brick wall, plaster wall covered in cork, and the lighting system hanging from the metal (before the fire) ceiling and plaster ceiling (after the fire), the look of the space during the period of significance had no fixed identity and often depended on what production was being performed. The room had about twenty small, octagon-shaped tables with chairs, which accommodated about forty patrons. These were easily and continually rearranged. Photos show the café as extremely crowded during performances, with patrons sitting everywhere, even atop the cigarette machine. An approximately eight-by-eight-foot, non-descript, portable piece of wood

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served as the stage and was most often placed along the northeast wall.<sup>4</sup> Along the top of the southeast wall was a loft, which provided storage space as well as a place for someone to sleep when needed (usually Joe Cino). A cigarette machine was located in front of the northeast window.

An important part of creating the atmosphere and setting for the plays produced at Caffe Cino was the lighting, which was characterized by spotlights that lit only the characters on stage, thus making them the sole focus. All patrons, room finishes, and other furniture receded in the service of the scene thus created.

The current bathrooms postdate the Caffe Cino period; during that time, one bathroom stall was located at the rear northeast corner. Also at that time the kitchen, which doubled as a dressing room, occupied a small space behind a curtain in the southwest corner. After the 1965 fire, this area was enlarged. The current kitchen space is also in the southwest corner, though in a larger space; it has tiled walls, a drop-down ceiling with fluorescent lighting, and a one-over-one metal window facing the rear courtyard (this window opening existed during the Caffe Cino era). A separate hallway and metal door, which leads to the rear courtyard, is located in the northeast section. In this same area is a staircase that leads to the basement. Historically, in terms of public use, this space was part of the front room – with the exception of a small office and changing rooms for performers at the northwest corner and a single bathroom at the northeast corner – and so its wall, ceiling, and floor finishes would have been the same. In the northwest corner, the Caffe Cino's coffee counter and (after the 1965 fire) the lighting booth were located in front of a partition that separated the office, kitchen, and dressing rooms; the sink was in the same location as the current one under the rear window. Memorabilia filled the walls behind the coffee counter.

### Rear Building

The three-story and raised basement brick building at the back of the property, 31 rear Cornelia Street, is separated from the front building by a concrete courtyard. It is three bays wide. The basement-level entrance, which provides access to the upper floor residences, has a faux Queen Anne style frame with a broken pediment lintel and a wood and glass door. There are two short one-over-one basement-level metal windows. The upper floors have one-over-one double hung replacement metal windows within narrow flat wood frames with the exception of two historic six-over-six wood windows and a wood octagonal window above the main entrance. The building also has a modest denticulated cornice and a metal fire escape.

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<sup>4</sup> According to Magie Dominic, the stage was most often placed on the northeast wall, but it was also located on the southwest wall, the center of the room, or propped up against a wall if a production did not need it. Dominic also provided most of the information about the historic Caffe Cino finishes that are mentioned in this section during a June 2017 site visit with Amanda Davis.



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### Integrity

Caffe Cino is entirely recognizable to the period of significance on both the exterior and the interior. On the exterior the building retains its size, scale, massing, form, configuration, materials, division into spaces and design. The storefront is almost completely intact to the period of significance and what is not intact is restorable. On the interior, the café space survives in terms of size, volume, openness, and informal character. There is evidence of some of the original finishes; however, they are not of crucial to understanding the use of the space as a performance venue.

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### Summary

The Caffe Cino is significant under criterion A in the areas of performing arts and social history as the first venue of importance to continuously stage Off-Off-Broadway theater, then a newly-emerging movement, and for its role in the development of gay theater and support of gay playwrights at a time when depicting homosexuality on stage was illegal. "The Cino," located in a ground-floor commercial space at 31 Cornelia Street in Greenwich Village from December 1958 to March 1968, was operated by Joe Cino (1931-1967), a gay man of Sicilian heritage. Although Cino initially intended to operate a coffeehouse with space for art exhibitions, he soon began to allow patrons to stage poetry readings and short theatrical performances. Original, experimental work by young and emerging playwrights began with the production of the anti-war themed *Flyspray* in the summer of 1960; four plays by Doric Wilson, the Cino's first resident playwright, in 1961 helped establish the café as a venue for new work. Caffe Cino thus became New York's first significant venue to feature the works of unknown playwrights such as Tom Eyan, Paul Foster, John Guare, Robert Heide, William M. Hoffman, H.M. Koutoukas, Claris Nelson, Robert Patrick, Sam Shepard, Charles Stanley, David Starkweather, Ronald Tavel, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Jeff Weiss, Doric Wilson, and Lanford Wilson. Several of these playwrights would go on to win Pulitzer Prizes, Tony Awards, and various other prestigious theater awards and recognitions, and some founded influential theater companies. The majority of these playwrights were gay men, illustrating the profound influence that this community had on the development of Off-Off-Broadway theater and the importance of Caffe Cino in nurturing and validating gay artists.

Off-Off-Broadway was particularly important for young, emerging playwrights in the 1960s because they could write about subjects of their choosing without the pressure of needing plays to be financially successful, as was the case on the Broadway and Off-Broadway stages. The new art form also championed the works of American playwrights, and the Cino therefore helped give birth to modern American theater at a time when productions were dominated by the works of European playwrights. Plays at the Caffe Cino were produced at very small budgets and staged with minimal set designs in front of intimate audiences. Seeing a play was also extremely affordable – the only expense was a minimum one dollar purchase from the café menu – and therefore people of various economic and social backgrounds had the opportunity to experience the world of theater. The most successful production here was George Haimsohn and Robin Miller's *Dames at Sea*, which was directed by Robert Dahdah and introduced teenager Bernadette Peters in 1966. The musical was revived several times before moving to Off-Broadway. Ellen Stewart, founder of the internationally renowned and still-active Café La MaMa (now La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club) in 1961, was inspired by the Caffe Cino and credited it as the beginning of the Off-Off-Broadway movement. The Cino also attracted the attention of established theater professionals and artists, including playwright Edward Albee, an avid supporter, and artist Andy Warhol, who based his first experimental split-screen film on the Cino play *The Bed* by Robert Heide.

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The Cino is also credited as the first venue to regularly perform plays by and about gay men.<sup>1</sup> Soon after the Cino opened, recent works by gay European and American playwrights (most frequently Tennessee Williams) were staged. In 1961, Doric Wilson included gay characters and themes in two of his plays, *And He Made A Her* and *Now She Dances!* The staging of Lanford Wilson's *The Madness of Lady Bright* in 1964 was the Cino's breakthrough hit, as well as another early play dealing explicitly with homosexuality. By 1965, the café had become well known for its plays dealing with gay subject matter. For the first time in New York, and, most likely the country, on a year-round basis and in one centrally located space, LGBT people regularly saw depictions of themselves in a more multi-dimensional and realistic light that contrasted with the negative stereotypes that had permeated mainstream theater and film for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> Operating in the years before the 1969 Stonewall uprising, which is generally considered the birth of the modern LGBT rights movement, the Caffe Cino was a crucial safe space for gay playwrights.<sup>3</sup> It allowed them to live openly, to feel welcome to write about gay subject matter, and to see their work staged in front of mostly receptive audiences at a time when this combination of factors was rare. The Cino thus provided an important platform for newly emerging gay playwrights, such as Tom Eyen, Paul Foster, Robert Heide, William M. Hoffman, H.M. Koutoukas, Robert Patrick, Charles Stanley, David Starkweather, Ronald Tavel, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Jeff Weiss, Doric Wilson, and Lanford Wilson, and gay directors, such as Neil Flanagan, Marshall W. Mason, Andy Milligan, and Tom O'Horgan. To a lesser extent, lesbians, such as playwright Claris Nelson and director Roberta Sklar, were also associated with the Cino.<sup>4</sup> The coffeehouse itself also served as an important social space for gay people to meet and socialize openly in the pre-Stonewall era, a time when LGBT public spaces were primarily limited to bars or explicit cruising areas such as bathhouses and parks. The café closed in March 1968, a year after Cino's suicide, which followed several personal and professional difficulties, including the accidental death of his boyfriend, Jon Torrey, the Cino's electrician.

The building at 31 Cornelia Street, a brick, four-story, three-bay, mixed-use building, retains substantial exterior integrity, including a bracketed wood cornice and storefront (now clad in wood paneling). Caffe Cino, which occupied the first floor, was a tiny, non-descript open space characterized by an exposed brick wall on the northeast side, a plain plaster wall covered in cork on the southwest side, a plain ceiling, a coffee bar and a small, portable wood stage placed along a side wall. Tables and chairs were simply pushed aside for performances, and most of the dramatic effects were achieved through the innovative work of lighting designer Johnny Dodd, a gay man who used pinpoint lighting to put all the focus on the performance and leave the rest of

<sup>1</sup> Wendell C. Stone, *Caffe Cino: The Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 43.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Luss, "Cherry Grove Community House & Theatre," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (New York: Cherry Grove Community Association, Inc., 2013), 8-4.

<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion of the birth of the modern gay civil rights movement, see Stonewall National Historic Landmark designation report.

<sup>4</sup> See Appendix for a list of notable playwrights, directors, and actors who were associated with the Caffe Cino and their achievements.

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the room completely dark. Today, although visible finishes are non-historic, the open space survives. Despite superficial changes, the interior of the former Caffe Cino retains its volume and the features that define its character as a tiny, casual, open space where experimental, illicit, and groundbreaking theater could be performed. The period of significance is 1958 to 1968, the café's years of operation.

### History of the Caffe Cino

The building at 31 Cornelia Street that housed the Caffe Cino from December 1958 to March 1968 was constructed in 1877 as a four-story, brick, pre-law tenement and store in the Italianate style.<sup>5</sup> It was built by Benjamin Warner for Michael Maloney (who had owned the property since 1867) and replaced a c. 1833 structure. The 1877 building is similar to most of the other buildings in the neighborhood, now recognized as the South Village Historic District (National Register listed).<sup>6</sup> The storefront held a variety of businesses over the years, such as a grocery store from at least the 1910s to the 1930s.<sup>7</sup> A rear multi-family building on the site (31 rear Cornelia Street) appears to have been built by 1843, although it has had later alterations.<sup>8</sup> It is within the South Village Historic District; however, no evidence has been found to suggest that it was associated with the Caffe Cino.

The Caffe Cino was operated by Joseph "Joe" Cino (1931-1967), a Buffalo, New York, native of Sicilian heritage. From a young age, Cino had a passion for opera and dance.<sup>9</sup> His three brothers – with whom he had previously been close – teased him "ostensibly because of his interest in dance but more likely because of his increasingly conspicuous sexual orientation."<sup>10</sup> As writer Michael Feingold noted in a 1985 article in *The Village Voice*, Cino's aspirations to be a dancer "had estranged him from his family since, as one of his best friends put it, a boy from an Italian family is not supposed to be a ballerina" (note the emphasis on the feminine

<sup>5</sup> A pre-law tenement is a multiple dwelling, typically five stories in height, built before 1879 (the year that the first law, now known as the "old law," regulating tenement construction was passed). These tenements were erected with the intention of housing large numbers of poor families and had very few amenities. Hundreds of pre-law tenements were built in the 1860s and 1870s in several neighborhoods in southern Manhattan, which had a large concentration of immigrants. Cornelia Street, where the Caffe Cino was located, and nearby Carmine Street and Jones Street have particularly high concentrations of pre-law tenements.

<sup>6</sup> The building is also listed in the Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II, designated by the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission in 2010.

<sup>7</sup> 31 Cornelia Street Use Card, New York City Housing Preservation & Development, October 19, 1916.

<sup>8</sup> New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II Designation Report* (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> Joe Cino would frequently play opera and classical music at the Caffe Cino and had little regard for folk music that was then popular in Greenwich Village coffeehouses. According to Cino actor Michael Warren Powell in a February 20, 1985 letter to Richard Buck and Magie Dominic, Joe played "lots of opera, especially Maria Callas (Joe worshipped her, and closed the cafe a couple of times to encourage people to go see her at the Met)." This letter is part of the Magie Dominic Collection of Caffe Cino Materials, 1958-2011, Billy Rose Theatre Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (henceforth Dominic Collection, NYPL).

<sup>10</sup> Stone, 17.

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“ballerina”).<sup>11</sup> Though close to his mother, Cino’s increasing tensions with his brothers and classmates led him to run away to New York City in 1948, at age sixteen, with two male friends. Within days of arriving in the city, on February 7<sup>th</sup>, he found a job in the cafeteria of the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) near Penn Station; he later worked at various jobs, such as in the reservation department at the Hotel Statler (now the Hotel Pennsylvania) and making ice cream sodas at a Howard Johnson’s restaurant. For two years, he also trained professionally as a dancer under the tutelage of Alwin Nikolais at the Henry Street Settlement Playhouse (now the Harry De Jur Playhouse) at 466 Grand Street on the Lower East Side. His performance courses also included acting, speech, and makeup.<sup>12</sup> However, his dance career was short-lived, likely because of his build.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, in 1958, he became a waiter at the Playhouse Café, a Greenwich Village coffeehouse at 131 MacDougal Street.<sup>14</sup> Named for its proximity to the neighboring Provincetown Playhouse, the café was operated by Jack Pelsinger and Phyllis Bochner with the intention of offering poetry and play reading as entertainment; however, it appears that this never materialized, as the café was soon replaced by a bordello.<sup>15</sup> (Bochner would serve as the Caffe Cino’s bookkeeper in its early years.)

In the 1950s and 1960s, coffeehouses were small, intimate spaces that were particularly popular in the Italian section of Greenwich Village, which is where the Caffe Cino was located. Folk musicians, poets, and bohemians frequented coffeehouses, mostly along MacDougal Street, and these places therefore became associated with various kinds of experimental work.<sup>16</sup> While the popularity of coffeehouse culture continued to grow in the Village in the late 1950s, Cino’s interest in opening his own coffeehouse actually began several years earlier. Indeed, he saved the money he earned at the Playhouse Café specifically for this purpose.<sup>17</sup> In 1965, he recounted, in his only known interview, “I started thinking about the café in 1954. It would just come and go. It would usually go when there were too many people trying to have a part in it. I would talk about it with close friends and it would just dissolve away into nothing.”<sup>18</sup> In 1958, at the same time Cino was looking to rent a space for use as a coffeehouse, his then-boyfriend, painter Ed Franzen, wanted a studio in order to paint and exhibit his work. They decided to combine both interests into one space. That November, Franzen told Cino about a “for rent” sign he had seen in front of the ground floor commercial space at 31 Cornelia Street. Cino later explained how he obtained the space:

<sup>11</sup> Michael Feingold, “Caffe Cino, 20 Years After Magic Time,” *The Village Voice*, May 14, 1985, 50-51, 117.

<sup>12</sup> Stone, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Steven J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 42.

<sup>15</sup> Stone, 19.

<sup>16</sup> For a history of the Italian community in the South Village see Donald Tricarico, *The Italians of Greenwich Village: The Social Structure and Transformation of an Ethnic Community* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Smith, “Joe Cino’s World Goes Up in Flames,” *The Village Voice*, March 11, 1965, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

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When I got there Ed was in conversation with Josie, the landlady, who was hanging out the upstairs window with blonde sausage curls. He said, "This is Mrs. Lemma." I said, "Oh, you're Italian." She says, "Yes, what are you?" I said, "Sicilian." So she said, "I don't even have to come down, I'll throw the keys." She threw the keys and we went in and viewed the ruins. The first thing you saw when you looked down the room was the toilet at the back. I thought, "There's a toilet, and there's a sink, and there's a fireplace. This will be a counter, a coffee machine here, a little private area."<sup>19</sup>

The space opened in December 1958 as the Caffe Cino Art Gallery, according to Cino, although it soon became known simply as the Caffe Cino.<sup>20</sup> Shortly after the opening, Franzen left New York due to health problems.<sup>21</sup> The café was small, occupying a room about eighteen feet wide by thirty feet deep.<sup>22</sup> Its location on Cornelia Street, a mostly residential side street only one block long, benefited from being near to the West 4<sup>th</sup> Street and Christopher Street subway stops, as well as from the major walking thoroughfares of Sixth Avenue, West 4<sup>th</sup> Street, Seventh Avenue South, and Bleecker Street. The Cino was also close to Washington Square Park, MacDougal Street, and New York University, where LGBT people, bohemians, artists, and college students congregated.

Joe Cino originally intended for his coffeehouse to feature art exhibitions; however, by March 1959, Sunday poetry readings were held regularly.<sup>23</sup> Less than a year later, on February 7, 1960, readings became theatrical with the first in a series of Sunday readings by the "Caffe Cino Reportory [sic]."<sup>24</sup> Of that performance, Cino recalled, "The first show we ever did at the Caffe Cino was a reading of 'A Christmas Memory' by Truman Capote. We sat there all that night and wept."<sup>25</sup> Scenes from Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Ernest* were also performed that evening. These works by two prominent gay writers reveal an early LGBT influence at the café, which will be discussed in depth later. During the summer of 1960, the Cino's first original play, the anti-war-themed *Flyspray* (1960) by James Howard, was performed; however, a regular schedule of plays had yet to begin and the "theatrical types" had yet to take over.<sup>26</sup> In 1961, the Cino had its first resident playwright in Doric Wilson; his four plays that year – two of which were early plays that dealt explicitly with homosexuality – helped to establish the Cino as a venue for new plays.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Stone, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>23</sup> Based on the first known ad appearing in *The Village Voice*, March 11, 1959.

<sup>24</sup> This information comes from the Cino's earliest known flyer, dated February 7, 1960, with the type-written title, "'Caffe Cino Reportory [sic]' Announces the First in a Series of Sunday Readings....." The flyer is in Dominic Collection, NYPL.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, "Joe Cino's World Goes Up in Flames."

<sup>26</sup> Michael Smith, *Johnny!* (Silverton, OR: Fast Books, 2011), 14. The *Flyspray* poster is in Dominic Collection, NYPL.

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In addition to Joe Cino, the café “crew” included three gay or bisexual men: Cino’s boyfriend, Jonathan “Jon” Torrey, the electrician and the first lighting designer; Kenny Burgess, the dishwasher as well as the designer of countless posters and collages for plays held there; and Johnny Dodd, the waiter and, beginning in July 1961, the main lighting designer.<sup>27</sup> Torrey managed to connect the café’s electrical system to a streetlamp by bypassing the electrical meter, thus enabling Joe Cino to save money on electricity (the café’s lights went on at the same time as the streetlights).<sup>28</sup> Dodd was responsible for the innovative lighting that became a key component in the café’s productions. By 1962, the Caffe Cino came into its own as a performance venue, putting on a new show almost every week and keeping to a regular schedule of two performances per night. A third show at 1:00 a.m. took place on Fridays and Saturdays. After the last show of the evening, Cino would gather in the café with his close friends; the critically acclaimed (gay) choreographer Jerome Robbins would often stop by so he and Cino “could dance on the tiny stage,” according to Cino actor Michael Warren Powell.<sup>29</sup> Between 1963 and 1964, 81 productions were held and regular reviews appeared in *The Village Voice*.<sup>30</sup> Cino was the one to schedule performances using the peculiar method of selecting a play based on the playwright’s astrological sign (he seldom, if ever, read the scripts).<sup>31</sup> He also introduced nightly performances and before leaving the stage area would famously say “It’s magic time.”<sup>32</sup> Most plays lasted approximately thirty minutes as a rule, as Cino felt the chairs were too uncomfortable for people to sit for any longer period of time. The café opened for evening performances and remained closed during the day while Joe Cino worked various jobs elsewhere in order to support the venue.<sup>33</sup> His presence there was essential; Lanford Wilson, the Cino’s most prolific playwright, stressed that “Joe Cino *was* the mood” of the room.<sup>34</sup> Cino was also the only person who knew how to operate the famed espresso machine at the coffee counter in the back of the room. Kenny Burgess, who stood near him washing plates, would not touch it.<sup>35</sup> Cino could most often be found behind the coffee

<sup>27</sup> Johnny Dodd lived in a top floor apartment at 5 Cornelia Street, at the corner of West 4<sup>th</sup> Street, with different roommates, including his friend Michael Wiley, who designed the café’s menu in 1962 and, later, his lover and then-*Village Voice* editor and theater critic Michael Smith, who would also direct plays at the Caffe Cino. Dodd had taken over the apartment from Joe Cino, who moved next to Kenny Burgess at 355 ½ Bowery before eventually moving to a basement apartment on Cornelia Street (exact location unknown). Smith, *Johnny!*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Stone, 29.

<sup>29</sup> Powell to Dominic and Buck. In Dominic Collection, NYPL.

<sup>30</sup> Magie Dominic, “Off-Off Broadway’s Origins at Caffe Cino,” Lecture, Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University, New York, NY, March 11, 2015, <http://bit.ly/2pTTzUW>.

<sup>31</sup> Leah D. Frank, “The Caffe Cino,” *Caffe Cino and its Legacy: An American Cultural Landmark*, Exhibition, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, 1985. This booklet (in Dominic Collection, NYPL) was made for the March 5 through May 11, 1985 exhibition at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and includes an introduction by the exhibition curators, Magie Dominic and Richard Buck.

<sup>32</sup> Magie Dominic, interview with Amanda Davis, June 6, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Ross Wetzsteon, “The Most Populist Playwright,” *New York*, November 8, 1982, 44.

<sup>35</sup> Dominic, interview.

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counter, which is where playwrights would usually go to show him their scripts in the hopes that they would be selected and added to the performance schedule. Cino veteran Magie Dominic states that “This was where Off-Off-Broadway theater was born.”<sup>36</sup>

Productions were made on very low budgets. Cino provided the room free of charge to playwrights, who would then bring in any costumes, props, and sets that they needed. Patrons also did not pay for entry, even during the most popular shows, when lines would form outside the café. Instead, they had to spend a minimum of one dollar from the menu; for example, for a pastry and a cup of coffee, one could see a play. (The menu, designed in 1962 by Michael Wiley, included the line “The First Caffe Theatre in Greenwich Village” and was used until the café closed in 1968.<sup>37</sup>) At the end of performances, a bucket would be passed around to audience members and the money would be split amongst the performers. Accounts vary on how many people the room could hold, but Magie Dominic estimates that there were about twenty tables that seated approximately forty to forty-five people. She added that the café was officially a packed house when two people were sitting on the cigarette machine by the easternmost front window.<sup>38</sup> Even if the audience was small or non-existent, Cino insisted that the show go on and asked that performers “do it for the room.”<sup>39</sup>

When productions were held, the room was dark except for lights that surrounded the stage, thus putting focus on the performance and nothing else. Joe Cino described the space as it appeared for Phoebe Mooney’s January 1962 adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland*, “The play was one of the most beautiful things we had at the Cino .... Johnny Dodd did the lighting, and it was very dark. I think it was the first time we had that kind of magic.”<sup>40</sup> For Cino, the ambience and intimacy of the room was as vital to the experience as the play itself. Of prime importance to him was that the audience at his café should feel welcome to engage with the performance, as opposed to other established arts venues, where the experience could be more intimidating. He recalled, “I

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Magie Dominic was a founding member of the Off-Off-Broadway movement of the 1960s and served as an assistant director, stage manager, and actress at the Caffe Cino from 1964 until its closing in 1968. She worked closely with Joe Cino and was one of a few people associated with the café to try to keep it open after he passed away. Dominic, who first heard about the Caffe Cino while working at Café La MaMa, remained part of the downtown Manhattan theater scene after the closing of the Cino and kept in touch with those associated with it. At the same time, she held on to Caffe Cino ephemera, photographs, correspondence, newspaper clippings, and other items; she continues to give talks about the history of the café. In 1985, she co-curated a major exhibition called “The Caffe Cino and Its Legacy” at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. Her Caffe Cino collection and other downtown theater memorabilia was donated to the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts in 2011 and New York University’s Fales Library and Special Collections in 2013. In addition to Dominic’s archives at these two institutions, her oral history provided to the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project was a major source of information for this nomination.

<sup>37</sup> Copies of the menu can be found in Dominic Collection, NYPL and the Magie Dominic Off-Off-Broadway Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library, New York University.

<sup>38</sup> Dominic, interview.

<sup>39</sup> Stone, 26. Stone cites interviews he undertook with playwrights Robert Heide and Lanford Wilson and actress Helen Hanft.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, “Joe Cino’s World Goes Up in Flames.”



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firmly believe that there is a definite place for café theatre and really to the letter of café, where hot coffee or hot anything may be spilled on an actor if he doesn't pay attention to the audience. It's very exciting to be working so close to people."<sup>41</sup> In the early days, the décor was minimal and the tone was sober, but the Cino gradually became "a kind of magical grotto."<sup>42</sup> In his book *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, theater historian Stephen J. Bottoms described the space:

...twinkling fairy lights, strung liberally across the ceiling, and then the sprinkling of glitter dust on the floor for show nights. Festoons of hanging decorations followed – cutouts, mobiles, baubles, glitter angels, miniature Chinese lanterns, and ever more fairy lights: eventually, one reporter noted, there were enough "to decorate a forest of psychedelic Christmas trees."<sup>43</sup>

Claris Nelson, one of the earliest female and lesbian playwrights to have original work performed at the Cino, echoed many other Cino veterans when she said of the comforting atmosphere, "It all had that gentle sort of twinkly feeling. You were totally safe in this environment."<sup>44</sup> It was, she also stated, "an island where our souls can play."<sup>45</sup> The look (or "feeling," as Joe Cino wrote) of the room would typically change with each production, which meant that new décor was in place every week unless a production ran for a longer period of time. Of the ever-changing design of the room, playwright Maria Irene Fornes recalled that "Every day it was like throwing a party!"<sup>46</sup> Regardless of the production, the walls of the Cino were covered in posters from past plays, photographs of movie stars and opera singers, portfolio shots of actors who were café regulars, and other pieces of memorabilia. One example was the resumé of a young Bette Midler, which she gave to Joe Cino soon after moving to New York and which he stapled to the wall behind the coffee counter, along with layers of other ephemera that he felt was particularly special.<sup>47</sup> (Contrary to some sources, Midler never performed at the Cino.<sup>48</sup>) The few times the walls of the Cino could be seen were in the early days, when posters neatly hung on the wall, or following a March 3, 1965 fire (which gutted the first-floor commercial space), though the walls quickly filled up again as the Cino returned to its normal operations.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Bottoms, 57.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. The quote by the reporter is from Dan Sullivan, Review of "The White Whore and the Bit Player," *The New York Times*, February 5, 1967.

<sup>44</sup> Bottoms, 57.

<sup>45</sup> John Keating, "Making It Off Off Broadway," *The New York Times*, April 25, 1965, X1.

<sup>46</sup> Bottoms, 58.

<sup>47</sup> Magie Dominic describes this wall as having been "prime real estate" for anything that Joe Cino felt was worth displaying by the coffee counter, where he spent most of his time. E-mail to Amanda Davis, August 4, 2017.

<sup>48</sup> Dominic, interview.

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Magie Dominic recalled 1964 as the year that the Caffe Cino really hit its stride as a performance venue; Lanford Wilson's play *The Madness of Lady Bright*, centered on an aging drag queen character, was a huge critical success and the Cino's breakthrough hit. The café's reputation was so strong and so respected that following the 1965 fire, which damaged the first floor space, a number of playwrights and local theaters hosted several benefits to raise funds for its reconstruction. A major benefit held at the Writer's Stage Theatre at 82 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street in the East Village on March 15<sup>th</sup> was organized by (gay) playwright Edward Albee, who donated the space, with the assistance of (gay) Cino playwright H.M. Koutoukas.<sup>49</sup> (Albee, already an established playwright, did not write for the Cino, but remained an avid supporter.) For the next two months, while the interior at 31 Cornelia Street was being rebuilt, the Cino performed plays at Ellen Stewart's Café La MaMa (later La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club) in the East Village on Sunday and Monday nights.<sup>50</sup> The comradery that Cino and Stewart enjoyed could be seen elsewhere, such as when Cino sent Jon Torrey to help set up La MaMa's first light board.<sup>51</sup>

As for the fire itself, the prevailing story was that a gas leak was the cause; in any event, a fireproof ceiling that Joe Cino had installed as part of a new lighting system just before the fire prevented the flames from reaching the upper stories of the building. Historian Tillie Gross describes the rear of the room, which underwent the most change, before and after the fire:

Somewhere near the rear of the store, a counter with an espresso machine was placed at first across the room, and then moved to the left with the tiniest of areas curtained off behind it as a kitchen, which doubled as a dressing room. Just opposite the kitchen, separated by a window in the back wall, was a tiny bathroom, which also doubled as a dressing room. After a fire in 1965, the area was enlarged to allow more space for the dressing room, and space was added near the espresso machine for a compact lighting board.<sup>52</sup>

Because of the damage from the fire, a new ceiling and suspended lighting were also installed. On May 18, 1965, the Cino resumed operations on Cornelia Street with a performance of *With Creatures Make My Way* by H.M. Koutoukas. The following year, the café staged its biggest hit, *Dames at Sea* (1966), starring a teenage Bernadette Peters in her first major role and running for seventy minutes (more than twice as long as the typical Cino production). Performing to packed houses for over two hundred shows during a two-month period, the

<sup>49</sup> Stone, 98. The program cover for the benefit was designed by artist Ann Sell (sp?) and shows a phoenix, with a body made of theater curtains and wings made of cutlery, rising from flames in a coffee mug.

<sup>50</sup> Ellen Stewart founded Café La MaMa in 1961, which will be discussed further in the "Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway Theater" section of this nomination.

<sup>51</sup> Feingold, 51.

<sup>52</sup> Tillie Gross, "Parallels in the Development of London's Royal Court, New York's Caffe Cino, and Café La Mama" (PhD diss., New York University, 1994), 178.

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play had the longest run of any Cino production. For such a success, however, *Dames* also marked the beginning of the Cino's decline. When the play moved to Off-Broadway, Joe Cino and *Dames* director Robert Dahdah never properly received credit for its creation, which was a tough blow emotionally. Cino also suffered financially when it left; the play's success over its long run meant that, according to Dahdah, "Joe was making money for the first time, paying bills for the first time."<sup>53</sup> *Dames* also led to the arrival of actor Robert Olivo – better known by his stage name Ondine – and other members of Andy Warhol's Factory (including Warhol himself), who began to frequent the café. Many Cino veterans have argued that the Warhol crowd was responsible for introducing hard drug use to the café and therefore contributed to its collapse and to Joe Cino's ultimate demise. Playwright Paul Foster wrote, "The Pop Art golems, spawned in a silver factory. When these slimy drug slaves entered the door they infected the place and made it unclean. ... They are directly responsible for the death of Joe Cino."<sup>54</sup> However, Stephen J. Bottoms argues that "the newcomers did not so much change the Cino as bring about an intensification of the operatic, potentially self-destructive energies that had always flourished there."<sup>55</sup> Since the café's early years, Cino himself had frequently taken amphetamines to keep up both with the café's demanding late-night, six-day-a-week performance schedule and his day jobs elsewhere.<sup>56</sup> In addition to a growing drug addiction, Cino suffered several personal and professional hardships in the post-*Dames* era (the last year of his life). He was said to be depressed about gaining weight, getting older, and losing control of his coffeehouse, as it became more famous and, therefore, less like the intimate space he had originally envisioned for himself and his friends.<sup>57</sup> To make matters worse, Cino's boyfriend, Jon Torrey, was accidentally electrocuted while assisting with a theater production in New Hampshire in January 1967. All of these factors, plus mounting financial troubles, weighed heavily on him. In the early morning hours of March 31, 1967, Michael Smith, then editor and theater critic for *The Village Voice* and director of a few plays at the café, found Cino on the floor by the coffee counter with self-inflicted stab wounds. Rushed to St. Vincent's Hospital, Cino died three days later on April 2<sup>nd</sup>. A tribute, involving plays and other entertainment, was held for him by both Cino veterans and members of the Off-Off-Broadway community at Judson Memorial Church. According to Magie Dominic, no one at the Cino knew what to do other than to keep the room going.<sup>58</sup> Working off a schedule of plays that Cino had put in place for the next several months, the café resumed operation with a staging of *Clown* (1967), by Claris Nelson.

Cino actor Charles Stanley assumed most of the responsibility for maintaining the Cino until Michael Smith and Wolfgang Zuckerman, a harpsichord builder, took over management. For a few weeks, the café closed for repairs and reopened on January 23, 1968. However, the Cino was quickly subjected to fines by city authorities

<sup>53</sup> Bottoms, 281.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Foster, "A Nurse in a Madhouse," *Other Stages*, March 22, 1979, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Bottoms, 283.

<sup>56</sup> According to Robert Dahdah, in Stone, 146.

<sup>57</sup> Stone, 152.

<sup>58</sup> Dominic, "Off-Off Broadway's Origins at Caffe Cino."

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for operating without a cabaret license, an issue that had plagued many Village coffeehouses since the late 1950s and that Joe Cino had previously managed to keep under control at his café through various payoffs (see discussion below). Particularly relevant to the period after Joe Cino's death was the harassment that the Caffe Cino faced from the MacDougal Area Neighbors' Association (MANA), formed in part by Ed Koch – the city's future mayor – in 1964 when he was the Democratic District Leader for an area of Manhattan that included the Village. Koch, who from 1967 to 1969 represented the Village and other nearby neighborhoods while serving on the New York City Council, refused to intervene when the Cino was heavily fined for not having a cabaret license. Smith recalled, "Once we had the cops' attention they did not let up. We had a valid restaurant license, but there was no license that would let us put on the kind of shows we were doing. We appealed to Ed Koch. The summonses cost \$250. We could not get them to stop, and we could not afford to pay them."<sup>59</sup> He further suspected that the Cino fell victim to Koch's desire to gain political standing with his constituents, many of whom disapproved of the kinds of people who frequented coffeehouses: "We are bizarrely caught in a political double crossfire. ... I can't help thinking that the Cino is somehow, indirectly, accidentally, being sacrificed to Ed Koch's political ambitions."<sup>60</sup> Without the ability to pay fines, Smith and others decided to close the café for good. The last performance ever staged at the Cino was *Monuments*, by Diane di Prima, which ran from March 5–17, 1968.

After the Cino, the ground floor space remained commercial. The most recent tenant, a restaurant, operated there from 1993 to 2017. The space is currently vacant. In April 2008, a plaque (since removed) donated by prominent Cino playwright Robert Patrick was installed on the exterior of the storefront.<sup>61</sup> It read, "On this site, in the Caffe Cino (1958-68), artists brought theatre into the modern era, creating Off-Off Broadway and forever altering the performing arts worldwide."

**Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway Theater**

The coffeehouse culture that was developing in Greenwich Village in the late 1950s provided new opportunities for painters, poets, and musicians to hone their skills in uncompetitive settings; playwrights soon appeared as well. A number of cafés began staging plays, but not with any regularity. Michael Smith recalled, "It began as a few very isolated productions here and there .... There were two or three cafés in the Village that occasionally did a play. It wasn't any movement. But then a couple of places started doing them all the time, so I could write something."<sup>62</sup> He began a review column called "Café Theatre," and by September 1960, a separate section for "Café Dramas" appeared once there were enough coffeehouse productions to list. Within two months, that

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Michael Smith, "Caffe Cino Closure," *The Village Voice*, March 14, 1968.

<sup>61</sup> This plaque was suddenly removed in May 2017 after the then-storefront tenant closed its business and left. It is unclear who did this and why.

<sup>62</sup> Bottoms, 40.

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section was retitled “Off Off-Broadway” and first appeared in the November 24, 1960 edition. Either Michael Smith or Jerry Tallmer, then the *Voice*’s chief dramatic critic, is generally credited with coining the term, although both deny this in Stephen J. Bottoms’s book *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*. Bottoms still writes, however, that it was coined by the *Village Voice* in 1960.<sup>63</sup> He theorizes that “in all likelihood [the term was] intended more as a joke than as serious recognition of a new substratum of New York theater.”<sup>64</sup> The name was intended to recognize the fact “that this new wave of small-scale theater was no longer confined merely to cafés.”<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, many of the most important components of Off-Off-Broadway theater were developed and flourished in coffeehouse settings.

Off-Off-Broadway was particularly important for young, emerging playwrights in the 1960s because they could write experimental work about subjects of their choosing without the pressure of needing plays to be financial successes. Importantly, it emphasized the staging of new works by American playwrights rather than existing work by mostly European playwrights.<sup>66</sup> It formed in response to the growing commercialism of Off-Broadway, which, ironically, itself was a movement begun in the 1950s as a reaction to the high-stakes commercialism of Broadway. With fewer than 100 seats, Off-Off-Broadway venues were intimate – as opposed to 100-499 seats for Off-Broadway and more than 500 seats for Broadway – and were located in unconventional spaces, such as coffeehouses, churches, or lofts, rather than in purpose-built theaters. Further, unlike Broadway and Off-Broadway, performers of Off-Off-Broadway theater were not part of the Actors’ Equity Association labor union and were largely unpaid (although there were union members who did perform Off-Off-Broadway by using different names to avoid being penalized by Equity and would often earn money through donations at the end of shows).<sup>67</sup>

Given that the Village was a long-time haven for artists and bohemians who rejected the establishment, it is not surprising that the neighborhood served as the cradle of the Off-Off-Broadway movement. Joe Cino even insisted that the work they were doing at the Caffe Cino was “in-café” rather than Off-Off-Broadway, suggesting that the term offered too close a connection to the mainstream theater world of Broadway and even Off-Broadway.<sup>68</sup> Although plays were being staged in various Village coffeehouses beginning in the late 1950s,

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Patrick in “2007 Artistic Achievement Award recipient, Doric Wilson,” New York Innovative Theatre Awards, September 23, 2007, <http://bit.ly/2hmiL2E>.

<sup>67</sup> The Actors’ Equity Association (more commonly known as Actors’ Equity or simply Equity) is a labor union for actors and stage managers of legitimate theater that was founded in New York City in 1913. Until 1959, it also represented directors and choreographers. Their role in threatening Off-Off-Broadway venues for allowing union members to perform on stage is discussed in Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*.

<sup>68</sup> Smith, “Joe Cino’s World Goes Up in Flames.”

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the Caffe Cino is credited by Stephen J. Bottoms as “the first off-off-Broadway venue of importance to emerge in the early 1960s.”<sup>69</sup> Indeed, Edward Albee – the critically acclaimed playwright and early supporter of the Caffe Cino – singled it out in 1964 in his criticism of the commercialization of Off-Broadway:

Off-Broadway ... is more and more beset by commercial problems—greedy landlords, union demands, costs. ... The Village coffeehouses have taken over the job of putting on the furthest-out, most risky plays of young writers restless with even the standard experimental forms. If you had gone to the Caffe Cino, on Cornelia Street, for example, in the past few months ... you might have stopped wondering where all the vital new theater is these days. Now that the bars are opening in the theaters uptown, you can get scotch with your dross. Cappucino [sic] with gold is better.<sup>70</sup>

Although theater that meets the definition of Off-Off-Broadway may have been performed in other small venues, the Cino is especially significant in the history of the genre because it remained in operation long enough to nurture and support the art form, thus allowing Off-Off-Broadway to become established. The Cino was also singularly devoted to the production of theater and it also gave a significant number of emerging playwrights, actors, directors, and others the opportunity to improve their technique and enhance their reputations, as well as providing audiences and critics with a chance to experience the new art form regularly. This is one reason that Caffe Cino played such an important role in the legitimization of Off-Off-Broadway. In contrast, Bottoms explains that the practice of staging plays in most other coffeehouses was short lived for two primary reasons. First, some of the earliest cafés on MacDougal Street only put on plays in order to capitalize on an increase in Village tourism, which peaked in the summer of 1960. These café owners did not have a particular interest in experimental theater as an art form and put no effort into its development once the tourism craze declined. In contrast, a 1962 article in *The Village Voice* noted that the Cino “remains a serious theatre-and-coffee enterprise without the usual touristy gimmicks.”<sup>71</sup> Secondly (and simultaneously), many cafés were heavily fined and/or temporarily shut down for staging plays without cabaret licenses and for other infringements, however minor. Fines only intensified for Village coffeehouses, including the Caffe Cino, over the decade; by 1964, the operator of the Gaslight Café at 116 MacDougal Street estimated that he had made seventy-four court appearances in four years.<sup>72</sup> These fines were in large part due to the attention that coffeehouses received from neighborhood residents, largely Italian, who would often complain about the noise, but who also took issue with many of the people – most often gay men and lesbians, African-Americans, bohemians, and interracial couples – who frequented them. Mayor Robert Wagner, in an effort to “clean up” the

<sup>69</sup> Bottoms, 39.

<sup>70</sup> Edward Albee, “Where the Action Is” (1964).

<sup>71</sup> J. R. G., “Notebook for Night Owls,” *The Village Voice*, January 18, 1962, 12.

<sup>72</sup> Bottoms, 41.

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city, also ordered the police to crack down on offending bars, coffeehouses, and other locations of “immoral” activity. With coffeehouses staging plays, the lack of a cabaret license became a primary excuse for the police to fine or close a place deemed undesirable. As with other owners, Joe Cino had a valid restaurant license to operate his café, but there was no license available for art and theater other than a cabaret license. However, in order to obtain a cabaret license he would need to first get a liquor license, and he had no interest in serving alcohol. He simply wanted his café to serve coffee and pastries and give the room for free to playwrights and artists.

The Caffe Cino managed to stay open because Joe Cino figured out early on that payoffs, which were constant, were the best way to deal with city officials “out of court” (a number of Cino veterans have also spoken of Cino’s rumored Mafia connections as well as sexual favors he gave to cops at the back of the room).<sup>73</sup> Another important factor was that, while other cafés had to close when they could not pay employee wages due to mounting fines (or they stopped staging plays to avoid them), Joe Cino had a close, inner circle of friends who volunteered to work without pay. Cino himself worked other jobs during the day and late-night hours to keep the café solvent. According to Bottoms, Cino’s friends “volunteered to make and serve food and drinks, wait tables, wash dishes, and mind the door. If they sought anything in return, it was only the opportunity to participate in the new plays that were constantly being scheduled for production.”<sup>74</sup> Robert Patrick recalled, “What made the Cino new, what created Off-Off-Broadway was its permanency. It wasn’t just some kids hiring a loft one night to do an experimental show. Every bloody week of the year you could come here and see experimental theater, which we were doing for free. We don’t care if anybody pays to see it. We’ve got to write and produce it.”<sup>75</sup> Other coffeehouses continued to show plays infrequently throughout the 1960s, but, as Michael Smith wrote in 1966, the Cino was “the only true café-theatre [then] functioning in New York City.”<sup>76</sup> At this time, as the threat of fines to the café for operating without a cabaret license intensified – and as its reputation as a gay hangout grew – the Cino began covering its windows with posters (made primarily by artist Kenny Burgess, the café’s dishwasher) in order to deter the attention of police. Intentionally abstract in design, the upside-down and sideways letters and art would be easily readable by Cino regulars but appear to be artwork to unsuspecting cops.

The Cino’s first resident playwright was Doric Wilson, whose four original plays in 1961 helped “establish the Cino as a venue for new plays and materially contributed to the then-emerging concept of Off-Off-Broadway,” according to Robert Patrick.<sup>77</sup> These included *And He Made A Her* (1961), *Babel Babel Little Tower* (1961),

<sup>73</sup> Billy J. Harbin, Kim Marra, and Robert A. Schanke, *The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy: A Biographical Dictionary of Major Figures in American Stage History in the Pre-Stonewall Era* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 96.

<sup>74</sup> Bottoms, 41.

<sup>75</sup> “Caffe Cino,” In the Life, Documentary Stories from the Gay Experience, c. 2009, <http://bit.ly/2vyBBcO>.

<sup>76</sup> Nick Orzel and Michael Smith, eds., *Eight Plays from Off-Off-Broadway* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 9.

<sup>77</sup> “2007 Artistic Achievement Award recipient, Doric Wilson.”

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*Now She Dances!* (1961; one act version), and *Pretty People* (1961). Wilson's work also played a part in establishing Off-Off-Broadway as a movement where new American plays were performed rather than older European ones (many of which had gay themes).<sup>78</sup> The Cino's reputation as a venue for original, experimental theater was noted in a January 1962 article in *The Village Voice*, "Embedded deep in Cornelia Street is an unobtrusive little coffee house where over the past two years more experimental theatre and more fledgling acting talent has spread wing than any other place in the Village. Caffe Cino is its name, and if one-act plays are your weakness you'll love the place."<sup>79</sup> By that point, the *Voice* noted that "Cino's actors ... have gone on to important off-Broadway roles or to the Stratford, Connecticut, Shakespeare Festival."<sup>80</sup> Between the time of Cino's first original play, *Flyspray*, in 1960, and the fire in March 1965, Joe Cino estimated that about 150 new plays were staged at his café.<sup>81</sup>

Off-Off-Broadway venues, such as the Caffe Cino, were located in non-theater spaces and were sparsely decorated. Remembers Michael Smith, "With none of the amenities of a conventional playhouse, the bare-bones Caffe Cino forced theatre artists to find new ways of doing things, and it turned out to be the birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway, to this day a seething center of innovation."<sup>82</sup> The Cino itself put on amateur productions in the early years, and Joe Cino himself did not seem interested in gaining fame for himself or his café. He only began encouraging Michael Smith to review plays after a number of playwrights wanted the press (particularly important for those who saw Off-Off-Broadway as a springboard to more professional endeavors). Even then, Cino requested that productions be listed in the "Cafés and Coffee Houses" section of *The Voice* rather than in the theaters section. Smith notes that Cino "was suspicious of publicity, really just wanting a place to hang out with his friends and encourage them to set their imaginations free, cherishing his independence and the open-mindedness of customers who wandered in with no idea what they were getting into."<sup>83</sup> Playwright H.M. Koutoukas, who rejected the commercial theater establishment, fully embraced the Cino's relaxed attitude, intimate space, and limited finances, which led to greater opportunity for creativity and experimentation.<sup>84</sup> This view was shared by other Cino veterans as well.

Although Joe Cino and many of those involved with the café enjoyed the amateur productions performed there, the arrival of playwright Lanford Wilson in 1963 marked the beginning of a more professional presence at the Cino. Wilson would become the Cino's most prolific playwright, with a total of nine plays performed there; his *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964) was a huge success with critics and audiences alike,

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> J. R. G., "Notebook for Night Owls."

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> John Keating, "Making It Off Off Broadway."

<sup>82</sup> Smith, *Johnny!*, 29.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>84</sup> Bottoms, 59.



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elevating the reputation of the Cino even further as a venue for new plays. As Cino veteran Joe Davies, a friend of Joe Cino's since the late 1950s, recalled, "Before you knew it, everybody who could get their hands on a Manila envelope was sending their scripts to 31 Cornelia Street."<sup>85</sup> When asked how Joe Cino managed to find so many talented people to perform at his café, Magie Dominic responded simply, "They found him."<sup>86</sup> Established stars of the stage and screen also were known to attend performances at the Cino; they included playwrights Edward Albee and Arthur Miller, actress Marlene Dietrich, and musician Tiny Tim.<sup>87</sup>

In the early 1960s, the Caffe Cino was joined by three other significant Off-Off-Broadway venues: Café La MaMa (now La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club), founded by Ellen Stewart in 1961 in the basement of 321 East 9<sup>th</sup> Street in the East Village; Judson Poets Theatre, founded by Al Carmines in 1961 at Judson Memorial Church on the south side of Washington Square Park; and Theatre Genesis, founded by Ralph Cook in 1964 at St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery in the East Village.<sup>88</sup> (Showing the influence that the LGBT community had on the development of Off-Off-Broadway, Cook made a point of noting the "almost conspicuous heterosexuality" of Theatre Genesis "within the Off-Off-Broadway circuit."<sup>89</sup>) La MaMa – forced to move several times due to fines and finally settling, in 1967, at its current home at 74 East 4<sup>th</sup> Street – managed to survive by charging a membership fee and becoming a semi-private club. The downtown Off-Off-Broadway community was small, providing for a lot of overlap of shows and those involved in staging them. Magie Dominic, for example, discovered the Caffe Cino through playwright Tom Egan when she was the stage manager of one of his plays at La MaMa. Plays that premiered at the Caffe Cino would often later be produced at the other venues and vice versa. Thus, all of their histories are crucial in understanding the Off-Off-Broadway movement. Even so, Ellen Stewart, whose La MaMa theater is widely considered by the theater community to be the most influential, long-lasting, and prolific Off-Off-Broadway venue, credits the Caffe Cino as the founder of the movement.<sup>90</sup> In 1985, she remarked, "It was Joseph Cino who started Off-Off-Broadway. I would like to ask everybody to remember that." She further noted, "We didn't know anything about theater at La MaMa ... The Caffe Cino knew *everything*."<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Feingold, 51.

<sup>86</sup> Dominic, "Off-Off Broadway's Origins at Caffe Cino."

<sup>87</sup> Stone, 151.

<sup>88</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the Off-Off-Broadway theater movement that includes the Caffe Cino, Café La Mama, Judson Poets Theatre, and Theatre Genesis, see Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*.

<sup>89</sup> Orzel and Smith, 94.

<sup>90</sup> Jay Shockley, *Aschenbroedel Verein (later Gesangverein Schillerbund/ now La Mama Experimental Theatre Club) Building Designation Report* (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2009).

<sup>91</sup> Feingold, 50.

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The year 1964 also marked the first time that Off-Off-Broadway productions made a significant showing at the Obie Awards (given by *The Village Voice* for excellence in Off-Broadway theater since 1956). For the 1964-1965 season, the Caffe Cino and Café La MaMa were awarded a joint special citation “for creating opportunities for new playwrights to confront audiences and gain experience of the real theatre.”<sup>92</sup> The award was the first of many for the Cino and its artists: in 1966, H.M. Koutoukas won a special citation for “the style and energy of his assaults on the theatre in both playwrighting and production” and Sam Shepard won for distinguished plays for three works, including *Icarus’s Mother* (1965); in 1967, Johnny Dodd was awarded best lighting for three works, including *The Madness of Lady Bright*.<sup>93</sup> By the mid-1960s, critics beyond *The Village Voice* and a few other small-circulation papers began to pay more attention to Off-Off-Broadway as its own movement for new plays and as an alternative, rather than a stepping stone, to mainstream theater (The *Voice* started including *The New York Times* line “The Off-Off Broadway Theatre Shrine” at the top of its listings for Cino plays).<sup>94</sup> The *New York Times Magazine* published its first major piece about the movement in its December 5, 1965 article, “The Pass-the-Hat Theater Circuit,” by *Voice* critic Elenore Lester, in which she spent time discussing the Cino: “[A]udiences sit at precariously balanced tables pushed close together and risk getting coffee and actors in their laps.”<sup>95</sup> This, she argued, was part of its success, as many audience members felt that they were part of the performance. Lester also wrote about several Cino playwrights, including Robert Heide, Claris Nelson, Robert Patrick, Sam Shepard, David Starkweather, and Lanford Wilson. Other significant artists associated with the Caffe Cino include playwrights Tom Eyan, Paul Foster, John Guare, William M. Hoffman, H.M. Koutoukas, Charles Stanley, Ronald Tavel, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Jeff Weiss, Doric Wilson; directors Robert Dahdah, Neil Flanagan, Marshall W. Mason, Tom O’Horgan, and Roberta Sklar; and actors Helen Hanft, Harvey Keitel, Al Pacino, Bernadette Peters, and Shirley Stoler. Pacino, then an unknown actor, made his Off-Off-Broadway debut in *Hello, Out There* at the Cino in 1963.<sup>96</sup>

Tom Eyan’s hit play *Why Hanna’s Skirt Won’t Stay Down* (1965) premiered at La MaMa, but also had a successful run at the Cino. Helen Hanft, who played the title character, became known as the “Queen of Off-Off-Broadway” for her portrayal, which also inspired a then-unknown Bette Midler. Midler, who was at that

<sup>92</sup> This award is in Dominic Collection, NYPL.

<sup>93</sup> A more complete list of Obie Award winners for the Caffe Cino and those associated with it are available in Dominic Collection, NYPL.

<sup>94</sup> These reviews from *The Village Voice* can be found in the Magie Dominic Off Off-Broadway Collection at New York University.

<sup>95</sup> Elenore Lester, “The Pass-the-Hat Theater Circuit,” *The New York Times Magazine*, December 5, 1965, 98, 100. Though this was the first major article about the movement, the first known mention of the café in *The New York Times* occurred on June 14, 1959, when a “Williams Watercolors” event at the “Caffe Cino Gallery” was advertised in the art galleries section. The first known play to be listed in the *Times* was *Among Dummies*, directed by Andy Milligan in the newspaper’s October 18, 1962 edition. Milligan, a gay man, directed a number of productions at the Cino in the early 1960s, including those with gay subject matter. See Stone, “Caffe Cino,” for more on Milligan.

<sup>96</sup> William Schoell, *Al Pacino: In Films and On Stage* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2016), 171.

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time performing in Eyen's *Miss Nefertiti Regrets* at La MaMa, later acknowledged that she incorporated Hanft's self-described "ballsy, lude [sic], brassy, Jewish woman" into her own performance style.<sup>97</sup> The following year, George Haimsohn and Robin Miller's *Dames at Sea* (1966), directed by Robert Dahdah, premiered at the Cino and became its most successful production. The principal cast of six also performed the roles of the chorus in order to accommodate the Cino's small stage. Magie Dominic believes that the play had the longest run of any Off-Off-Broadway production at that time, and Stephen J. Bottoms referred to it as "perhaps, off-off-Broadway's [*The Importance of Being Earnest*]," the classic Oscar Wilde play.<sup>98</sup> It was also listed among the "Best Plays of 1966-67" in the *Best Plays* book, an annual chronicle of American theater founded by long-time theater critic Burns Mantle in 1920.<sup>99</sup>

Even though the Cino was only open for ten years, its significance can be measured by the substantial influence that it had in shaping the Off-Off-Broadway movement in its infancy and on the careers of the important artists associated with it. A selection of remembrances by Cino veterans and other Off-Off-Broadway pioneers testifies to the latter point:

"There is nothing like it and there never will be again." And, "If it were not for the Cino, if it were not for Tom Eyen, I would probably not be where I am. I am glad it happened to me .... I feel I was very lucky and very charmed to meet those two men, Cino and Eyen .... Because they did take me and put me together and make me an actor."<sup>100</sup> –Helen Hanft, actress

"Remember that what came from his soul, what came from his heart, what came from his mind contributed in a large degree to everything that we are doing today."<sup>101</sup> –Ellen Stewart, founder of La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club

"[The Caffe Cino] is the beginning! This is it! The major things done in New York were done there, and nowhere else. I don't give a shit what anybody else says. They're lying."<sup>102</sup> –John Vacarro, founder of the Playhouse of the Ridiculous

"At the Cino, for the first time in the history of the world, theater was taken seriously as an independent and responsible art form." And "Because the Cino did not make or hope to make its money from theater, we were encouraged to put on plays that in form, content, style, language,

<sup>97</sup> Helen Hanft, "His Eye Is on the Sparrow Helen" (interviewer unknown), *Michael's Thing*, September 9, 1974, 30.

<sup>98</sup> Bottoms, 282.

<sup>99</sup> "The Best Plays Theater Yearbook." [www.bestplays.org](http://www.bestplays.org).

<sup>100</sup> Stone, 188.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Gary Comenas, "Caffe Cino." <http://bit.ly/2vdwc9T>.

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structure, were exactly what we wanted to do, and not what would please some audience ....  
With the Cino, effectively, theater entered the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>103</sup> –Robert Patrick, playwright

“The Cino was a place where you were not only encouraged, you were required, to express every  
bit of madness you ever had.”<sup>104</sup> –Shirley Stoler, actress

“The spirit of the Caffe Cino remained with many of us over the years and was a motivating  
force in the formation of many similar café/theatres around the country. The women’s  
coffeeshouses in Knoxville, Tennessee, and in Nashville—both of them started in the 70’s—owe  
their origins to the Caffe Cino.”<sup>105</sup> –Merrill Harris, playwright

Wendell C. Stone cites the Theatre for the New City, a leading Off-Off-Broadway theater founded in 1971 in the  
East Village, as having a similar operating style as the Cino.<sup>106</sup> He also adds that the Circle Repertory Theatre  
Company, which lasted from 1969 to 1996, was one of the direct descendants of the movement begun at the  
Cino (two of its founders being Marshall W. Mason and Lanford Wilson, whose career-long collaboration began  
at the Cino).<sup>107</sup> Many plays that premiered at the Cino have been played in theaters around the world, including  
those that were part of La MaMa’s international tours as early as 1965 and 1967. Charles Marowitz, co-founder  
of London’s Open Space Theatre and London Traverse Theatre, illustrates the global reach of the small  
coffeeshouse on Cornelia Street:

Caffe Cino produce[d] a kind of theatrical fare which was new to New York—plays by marginal  
types, mavericks, and non-belongers that made up the Greenwich [Village] Community of the  
late 50’s and early 60’s. The new ambiance spawned a new kind of play; not only a new way of  
experiencing a play, but material which reflected experience peculiar to the denizens of the world  
that created it. So Cino has two great claims to fame: it created a place and it created an oeuvre.  
There are innumerable theatres that are part of its progeny—in England, the King’s Head, The  
Bush, the Traverse Theatre Club, the Arts Lab in Covent Garden, and virtually all the fringe  
theatres that combine play going and dining.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Feingold, 50.

<sup>104</sup> Feingold, 50.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Robert Patrick, “Caffe Cino: Memories by Those Who Worked There,” *Los Angeles Theatre Magazine*, November 1994,  
18.

<sup>106</sup> Stone, 183.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Quoted in Patrick, “Caffe Cino: Memories by Those Who Worked There,” 18.

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The legacy of the Caffe Cino, with its more than 225 original plays and revivals, has been acknowledged in several ways since it closed almost fifty years ago. Magie Dominic, Cino veteran and self-described “unintentional Caffe Cino Archivist,” credits playwright Edward Albee with making her aware of the importance of preserving the café’s history and photographs (the majority of which she had received from James D. Gossage, a friend who photographed Off-Off-Broadway venues and people in the 1960s). In 1985, Dominic and Richard Buck curated a major retrospective called “The Caffe Cino and Its Legacy” at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. This, according to Dominic, was also the first exhibition celebrating the history of Off-Off-Broadway theater.<sup>109</sup> Dominic has also lectured extensively on the café’s history and donated Cino materials and ephemera to both the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts and New York University’s Fales Library and Special Collections. Publications that discuss the significance of the Caffe Cino include, but are not limited to, *Caffe Cino: The Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway* by Wendell C. Stone; *Off-Off-Broadway Explosion: How Provocative Playwrights of the 1960s Ignited a New American Theater* (includes the chapter “Caffe Cino: ‘Do What You Have To Do’”) by David A. Crespy, with a foreword by Edward Albee; *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (includes the chapter “Caffe Cino: The Birth of a Movement”) by Stephen J. Bottoms; *Return to the Caffe Cino*, edited by Steve Susoyev and George Birimisa; and *Passing Performances: Queer Readings of Leading Players in American Theater History* (includes the chapter “Joseph Cino and the First Off-Off-Broadway Theater”), edited by Robert A. Schanke and Kim Marra.

## **The Impact of the Caffe Cino on Gay Theater**

Greenwich Village had establishments that catered to the gay and lesbian community at least as early as the 1890s, notably along Bleecker Street in the South Village, just south of Washington Square (these blocks are in the National Register-listed South Village Historic District, which also includes Caffe Cino).<sup>110</sup> In the early twentieth century Greenwich Village became a center for the city’s bohemian community of radical writers and artists.<sup>111</sup> As historian George Chauncey noted, many of the bohemians were not supportive of gays and lesbians, but their nonconformist attitudes gave cover to homosexuals.<sup>112</sup> The Washington Square area was the

<sup>109</sup> Magie Dominic, e-mail to Amanda Davis, August 3, 2017.

<sup>110</sup> The first two paragraphs of this section are adapted from Andrew Dolkart, “Julius’ Bar,” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (New York: NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, January 2016). No. 31 Cornelia Street is also part of the Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II that was designated by the New York City Landmark Preservation Commission in 2010. A history of the LGBT presence in the South Village can be found in Jay Shockley, “The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Community’s Presence in the South Village,” in New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, *South Village Historic District Designation Report* (New York: Landmarks Preservation Commission, 2013), 35-39.

<sup>111</sup> For the early history of gay and lesbian Greenwich Village, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 227-244 and Chauncey, “Long-Haired Men and Short-Haired Women: Building a Gay World in the Heart of Bohemia,” in Rick Beard and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz, eds, *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 151-164.

<sup>112</sup> Chauncey, “Long-Haired Men,” 153-154.

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center of gay and lesbian activities with bars and restaurants such as “Eve Addams” Tearoom at 129 MacDougal Street (a popular lesbian club) and the Black Rabbit, at 111 MacDougal Street. Washington Square West was a major cruising area for gay men. In his book, *Gay New York*, Chauncey writes that “By the early 1920s, the presence of gay men and lesbians in the Village was firmly established.... [They] appropriated as their own many of the other social spaces created by the bohemians of the 1910s. Chief among these were the cheap Italian restaurants, cafeterias, and tearooms that crowded the Village and served as the meeting grounds for its bohemians....By the end of the war, the gay presence seemed to some worried observers to have become ubiquitous.”<sup>113</sup>

In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the presence of the LGBT community in the Village increased, especially in the Washington Square area, with commercial establishments such as the San Remo Café, at 93 MacDougal Street/189 Bleecker Street, which attracted many prominent gay artists and writers among its diverse patrons. Among those who frequented the San Remo in the late 1940s and early 1950s were Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, James Baldwin, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, W. H. Auden, Harold Norse, John Cage, Larry Rivers, Frank O’Hara, and Merce Cunningham.<sup>114</sup> The association of Greenwich Village with gays and lesbians is evident in a 1936 article from *Current Psychology and Psychoanalysis* entitled “Degenerates of Greenwich Village,” which noted that Greenwich Village “once the home of art, [is] now the Mecca for exhibitionists and perverts of all kinds.”<sup>115</sup> An equally denigrating description of the gay environment in the Village was given by Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer in their *New York Confidential* of 1948. The authors start the chapter entitled “Where Men Wear Lace Lingerie” by stating that “not all who call their flats in Greenwich Village ‘studios’ are queer. Not all New York’s queer (or, as they say it, ‘gay’) people live in Greenwich Village. But most of those who advertise their oddities, the long-haired men, the short-haired women, those not sure exactly what they are, gravitate to the Village.”<sup>116</sup>

In the late 1950s and 1960s gay life began moving west in the Village toward Greenwich Avenue and the Sheridan Square/Christopher Park area. The Caffe Cino was located roughly four blocks south of Christopher Park, with West 4<sup>th</sup> Street serving as a link between Cornelia Street and the park. That area includes the Stonewall Inn (National Historic Landmark), which became famous in 1969 (a year after the Caffe Cino closed) for the rebellion that is generally seen as the beginning of the modern gay rights movement.<sup>117</sup> Around the

<sup>113</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 237.

<sup>114</sup> Shockley, 38.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted in Chauncey, “Long-Haired Men,” 158.

<sup>116</sup> Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, *New York Confidential: The Lowdown on the Big Town* (Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing Co., 1948), 72.

<sup>117</sup> Stonewall was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1999, became a National Historic Landmark in 2000, and was designated a New York City Landmark in 2015. In 2016, President Barack Obama designated the Stonewall National Monument, which covers the federally owned Christopher Park. That same year, the Stonewall Inn became a New York State Historic Site.

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corner from the Stonewall is Julius' (National Register listed), a gay bar that was the site of the 1966 "Sip-In" by the Mattachine Society, a homophile organization that began advocating for gay rights in the 1950s.<sup>118</sup>

While bars in the pre-Stonewall era were the most common places for the LGBT community to gather, the coffeehouses that sprung up in the Village during this period also became popular. In opening the Caffe Cino in December 1958, Joe Cino did not specifically create the space for an exclusively gay clientele. Cino's original intention was to simply provide a space for himself and his friends and to showcase the work of local artists. Eventually poetry and theater became an integral part of the café, and, indeed, a mixed crowd of gay and straight people enjoyed the Cino throughout its ten-year history. However, as a gay man with gay friends, many of whom were artists, Cino's café naturally became an important social hub for the LGBT community at a time when public LGBT spaces were largely limited to bars, bathhouses, and outdoor cruising areas. Cino playwright Robert Patrick, who arrived at the café in 1961, recalled, "I had found a lot of wonderful, gay people [at the Caffe Cino], an alternative to the dreary chain gangs of the bars and baths and streets, a breeding-place for gay dignity and wit."<sup>119</sup> Michael Smith, then editor and theater critic of *The Village Voice*, described the café's patrons by 1962, "The regulars, some flamboyantly gay, others merely eccentric, spoke a campy private language and shared a fanatical love of opera, which dominated the soundtrack."<sup>120</sup> Although not intentional, the café's specific mix of owner and patrons contributed to an environment where plays by and about the LGBT community quickly became an important aspect of the Caffe Cino. Furthermore, the room provided the rare opportunity to stage gay-themed works during a period when LGBT people continued to face harassment and saw themselves largely reduced to negative stereotypes on stage and on screen.

In the context of 20<sup>th</sup> century American theater, stage performances dealing with gay themes and depictions of gay life in various forms appeared as early as 1907. These typically have come in the form of supporting characters playing up early 20<sup>th</sup> century gay stereotypes of swishy men or villainous lesbians, as Patrick mentioned. Robert A. Schanke, in *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History*, writes that gay playwrights "used coded language, substituted straight for queer characters, and formed their plots in heterosexual contexts in order to gain acceptance and production of their places."<sup>121</sup> The work of Tennessee Williams, frequently staged at the Cino in the early years, best illustrates this point. George Chauncey, in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, discusses gay representation in the performing arts in the pre-World War II era. Chauncey cites two New York City examples that give an idea about how the LGBT community was often depicted: the Ritz Review (1926), which was a

<sup>118</sup> Julius' was listed on the National Register in 2016. More information about the Mattachine Society, police raids on gay bars, and the "Sip-In" can be found in the Julius' NR Nomination.

<sup>119</sup> Robert Patrick, "Robert Patrick on Caffe Cino: Laughs, Critical Gaffes," *Advocate*, May 17, 1979, 41.

<sup>120</sup> Smith, *Johnny!*, 19.

<sup>121</sup> Kim Marra and Robert Schanke, *Staging Desire: Queer Readings of American Theater History* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

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burlesque house that presented “Queer Doings,” sketches that were characterized by same-sex male “kissing and goosing” to a hooting and catcalling anti-gay audience, and the Pansy Club (1930), a nightclub that ushered in the “Pansy Craze” era (1930-31) in New York and featured sophisticated female impersonators posing as patrons and mingling with regular (mostly heterosexual) club goers on the club floor. One famous “pansy entertainer” there was Jean Malin, whose act “revolved around his being gay, not as a ‘normal’ man [scornfully essaying] mincing gay mannerisms or homosexual buffoonery.”<sup>122</sup> Sympathetic works were often the subject of police harassment, such as the play *Modernity* (1929) at the Play Mart (a cellar theater on Christopher Street for amateur theatricals), which was based on Eve Addams’s collected short stories, *Lesbian Love*, and which was quickly shut down in anticipation of an imminent police raid. In response to “controversial” subjects – homosexuality and interracial relationships, in particular – being explored in New York City’s theaters in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the New York Legislature passed the Wales Padlock Law in 1927. As a result, “depicting, or dealing with, the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion” was made illegal and offending theaters could be closed down.<sup>123</sup> Although the law was not often enforced and was protested by the theater community, it had a huge and censorious effect on the Broadway stage. However, despite the law, which existed until 1967, lesbian and gay characters did appear on Broadway, often in the works of lesbian and gay playwrights.

Even so, the LGBT community lacked a physical space where people could consistently gather and see works of art by and about them. According to the National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Cherry Grove Community House and Theater, the only such documented space before the Caffe Cino is believed to have been the Cherry Grove Playhouse in the hamlet of Cherry Grove on Fire Island, known as “America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town” and an “outpost of Greenwich Village.”<sup>124</sup> Opened in 1948, the theater is, according to the National Register nomination, “arguably, the first and oldest continually operating gay theater in America” that was “continually produced by gay people, for gay and straight audiences in the United States.” As a seasonal resort, however, plays were only staged during the summer. The nomination notes that “theater seating was never affixed to the auditorium’s floor. In this respect, once the accoutrements are stored away at the end of each summer, the grove community house and theater came to resemble nothing more or less than a typical, mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American high school gymnasium....”<sup>125</sup> Further, given the theater’s isolated location on Fire Island and the above average \$100 rental fee of a summer cottage, more affluent and established gay and lesbian business and theater professionals (including Hollywood stars) who could afford to live there throughout the summer benefited the most from the theater season. In the early years, shows were “camp” in nature, thus

<sup>122</sup> Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 316-318.

<sup>123</sup> Similarly, Hollywood movies were subjected to the infamous Motion Picture Production (Hays) Code of 1930, which, beginning in 1933, strictly enforced a ban on major film studios that produced movies showing “immoral” subjects, such as homosexuality and interracial relationships.

<sup>124</sup> Luss, 8-1; Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove Fire Island: Sixty Years in America’s First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), cover.

<sup>125</sup> Luss, 8-4.



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providing vacationing theater professionals in particular with more light-hearted fare: “Many of the property owners and newcomers to Cherry Grove were in show business, and summer theatricals quickly evolved .... As an escape from the seriousness of the professional theater and as a means of publicly expressing themselves without fear of reprisal, they indulged in theatrical fun and games and set a precedent on Fire Island for gay vacationers engaging in camp presentation.”<sup>126</sup> These were primarily skits and musical revues as opposed to plays.

In contrast, the Caffe Cino was a year-round venue centrally located in Greenwich Village, the epicenter of gay life in New York City. And while its stage was not affixed to one location (or, for some productions, not used at all), there was always space set aside for performances. Plays were also accessible and affordable – regardless of one’s economic or social status – since patrons did not have to purchase tickets; their only cost of admission was the one dollar café minimum. Also, while the Cino staged camp productions, serious work was the focus of its programming from the beginning. As opposed to Cherry Grove, where theater professionals sought an escape from their working life, the Caffe Cino offered emerging gay playwrights the opportunity to hone their craft and be critically reviewed. Thus, the burgeoning gay theater movement was given a prominent, year-round, affordable, and centrally located space in which to expose an even greater audience to gay culture and community. In *Gay Plays: The First Collection*, editor (and Cino veteran) William M. Hoffman states that “the manner in which a play is acted and directed will determine if a production is ‘gay theater.’”<sup>127</sup> He defines gay theater as a production that implicitly or explicitly acknowledges that there are gay people on both sides of the footlights.<sup>128</sup> “Gay theater winks, flirts, and looks at its audience in a certain way, as two homosexual strangers might at a party or bar .... Gay theater will certainly ‘camp,’ that is, emphasize style to such a degree that the style will become the subject matter.”<sup>129</sup> He goes on to say that “Both gay plays and gay theater were pioneered at the Cino from the beginning. Early productions can only be described as homosexual in style.” Plays also “affirmed in a positive fashion the existence of gays.”

According to Wendell C. Stone in *Caffe Cino: Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway*, the Cino was “the first venue to regularly feature work by and about gay men.”<sup>130</sup> The staging of recent works by gay European and American playwrights (most frequently Tennessee Williams, with fourteen) in the café’s earliest years was common and foreshadowed the gay-themed works for which it would become known.<sup>131</sup> In addition to the four gay or

<sup>126</sup> Milly S. Barranger, *A Gambler’s Instinct: The Story of Broadway Producer Cheryl Crawford* (n.p. Board of Trustees, Southern Illinois University, 2010), 105.

<sup>127</sup> William M. Hoffman, ed., *Gay Plays: The First Collection* (New York: Avon Books, 1979).

<sup>128</sup> Luss, 8-2.

<sup>129</sup> Hoffman, *Gay Plays*.

<sup>130</sup> Stone, 43.

<sup>131</sup> Leah D. Frank, “Plays Performed at the Caffe Cino,” *Caffe Cino and its Legacy: An American Cultural Landmark*, Exhibition, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, 1985. In Dominic Collection, NYPL.

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bisexual men (Joe Cino, Jon Torrey, Kenny Burgess, and Johnny Dodd) who primarily operated the Cino, gay playwrights, directors, and actors were an integral part of the café. Joe Cino's approach of encouraging playwrights to write about whatever issues were important to them led many to explore gay themes and characters in their work. Robert Patrick recalled, "We were not consciously or programmatically creating gay theater. The freedom Joe Cino gave to playwrights just happened to give us the courage to write what was on our minds, and we both had gay stories we wanted to tell. So, it turned out, did several other writers at the Cino."<sup>132</sup> Patrick cited *Now She Dances!* (1961; one act version) by Doric Wilson, a gay man who was the Cino's first resident playwright, as the first Off-Off-Broadway play to portray gay people in a positive light.<sup>133</sup> It was also an early play to deal with gay identity. Said Wilson, "The play started out as a response to the hilarious histrionics and fruity language of Lord Douglas's translation of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*. The resulting play became an angry, ironic, nightmarish metaphor for the trial of Oscar Wilde – the quintessential closet queen. It was Wilde's determination to establish his heterosexuality in court which led to his fatal final trial."<sup>134</sup> Wilson's *And He Made A Her* (1961) premiered at the Cino in March of that year and examined the drag scene at that time.

While it is important to note that both gay and straight Cino veterans describe Joe Cino as a nurturing father figure and the café as a safe space where experimental work of any subject was encouraged, the Cino's environment was particularly important for gay playwrights in allowing them to live openly, to feel welcome to write about gay subject matter, and to see their work staged in front of mostly receptive audiences at a time when this combination of factors was rare. In the post-World War II era, homophobia was so widespread in American society that it even found its way into reviews by theater critics (indeed, the first review for the Caffe Cino to appear in *The Village Voice*, in December 1960, noted that the play *No Exit* featured "faggots camping").<sup>135</sup> Government, religious, educational, and medical institutions were also forces of oppression; homosexuality, for example, was still classified as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association, a classification it would not lift until 1973. However, as a result of the freedom of expression that gay playwrights enjoyed at the Cino, audiences were given rare public exposure to multi-dimensional and realistic gay characters there that challenged the negative and stereotypical portrayals that had permeated mainstream theater and film for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Recalled Robert Patrick, "Before the Cino the gay characters we knew about were either villainous lesbians preying on girls in vampire movies or silly hat designers and choreographers."<sup>136</sup> Patrick, who was inspired by the work of Doric Wilson, wrote his first play, *The Haunted Host* (1964), about a

<sup>132</sup> Henrik Eger, "Robert Patrick: One of Nation's Oldest Gay Playwrights on Being Part of Theater History," South Florida Gay News, *Edge Media Network*, October 10, 2014, <http://bit.ly/2uiG5Ai>.

<sup>133</sup> "2007 Artistic Achievement Award recipient, Doric Wilson." Wilson later turned *Now She Dances!* into a full-length play in 2000.

<sup>134</sup> Doric Wilson, "Now She Dances!," *Lodestar Quarterly*, Issue 8, Winter 2003, <http://lodestarquarterly.com/work/161/2/>.

<sup>135</sup> Seymour Krim, *The Village Voice*, December 1960.

<sup>136</sup> "Caffe Cino," In the Life.

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“fresh, stronger image of the gay man” who “throws out an opportunistic hustler.”<sup>137</sup> Interestingly, Patrick remembers a young man sitting with his parents in the audience and saying to them during the production, “You see, Mom, Dad? That’s what I am. I’m a homosexual.”<sup>138</sup> This indicates the empowerment and validation that gay-themed plays at the Cino gave to LGBT people – if not to come out of the closet then to at least think of themselves in a more positive light – thus serving as an important pre-cursor to the activism that would erupt in a few short years at Stonewall and the ensuing gay liberation movement of the 1970s.

The Cino’s breakthrough hit, and an early play to feature an explicitly gay character, was Lanford Wilson’s *The Madness of Lady Bright*, which premiered in May 1964 and ran for two weeks. Centered around an aging drag queen slowly going mad alone in his room, the play was so successful that the Cino brought it back two weeks later and revived it several times. It later moved to Off-Broadway. The play’s popularity and critical success helped make 1964 the year that the Caffe Cino really took off as a performance venue of experimental theater, and by 1965 it became particularly well known for presenting gay or gay-friendly works. According to Wendell C. Stone, “The Cino presented performances by and about gay men to a degree never before experienced.”<sup>139</sup> In addition to Robert Patrick, Doric Wilson, and Lanford Wilson, emerging gay playwrights at the Cino included Tom Eyan, Paul Foster, Robert Heide, William M. Hoffman, H.M. Koutoukas, Charles Stanley, David Starkweather, Ronald Tavel, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Jeff Weiss, and gay directors, such as Neil Flanagan, Marshall W. Mason, Andy Milligan, and Tom O’Horgan. Author Sara Warner notes that the Cino “was not a place for lesbians .... with a radical feminist agenda,” but that there were some lesbians at the Cino, including playwright Claris Nelson and director Roberta Sklar.<sup>140</sup> Even the Cino’s most successful production, *Dames at Sea* (1966), had “a frisson of camp irony,” including, for example, “the gender ambiguities of the title song, with its sexually frustrated sailor boys” that the Cino’s gay regulars would have picked up on, but that straight audiences at the time may have missed.<sup>141</sup> Robert Heide’s *The Bed* (1965), directed by Roberta Sklar, focuses on the relationship between two men in bed together. Its success led to about 150 performances at the Cino and a film version by Andy Warhol (his first experimental split-screen film), who stated that “The Bed is beautiful emptiness. A work of genius.”<sup>142</sup>

The following quotes come from an *In the Life* documentary about the Caffe Cino, in which gay playwrights and directors spoke about the significance of the Cino in the development of gay theater and their own

<sup>137</sup> Stone, 95; Robert Patrick, “Where Gay Plays Began,” *Other Stages*, February 8-21, 1976, 26

<sup>138</sup> Stone, 95.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>140</sup> Sara Warner, *Acts of Gaiety: LGBT Performance and the Politics of Pleasure* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 63.

<sup>141</sup> Bottoms, 282.

<sup>142</sup> Andy Warhol’s review can be found on the Caffe Cino poster for *The Bed*, part of Dominic Collection, NYPL.

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careers.<sup>143</sup>

The Caffe Cino was a place where people could come and be themselves and be comfortable with whatever their sexuality was. –Marshall W. Mason

For Joe [Cino], the doors were always open: do your own thing, do what you have to do, do what you want to do.–Robert Heide

The incredible freedom of being able to be yourself in that place and outside that place and your work ... You could do just anything and it made me want to experiment like crazy. –Lanford Wilson

Everybody who came there had been suppressing some part of themselves, some vital creative part of themselves, which they could express at the Caffe Cino .... Caffe Cino was different from other places for gay people in that, for one thing, in those days there weren't too many places that gay people could write for honestly. Two: it wasn't doctrinaire. It isn't like it had a kind of agenda about being gay .... I never would have been a playwright without the Caffe Cino. I never certainly would have written about gay subjects that freely. That was the kind of empowerment that the place gave us. We were no longer victims. –William M. Hoffman

While gay theater at this time was dominated by gay white men and female directors were rare in the theater world in general, Roberta Sklar was a pioneering female and lesbian director who began directing plays at the Cino in 1963. She describes the scene there,

It was an environment that really allowed for experimentation. It was the beginning of the male homosexual theater that was “out.” It was really “anything goes.” I was not ready for “anything goes,” but it was a great place to learn in. It included a community of people who came night after night because they were interested. We'd watch each other's work, hang around and explore and chew the fat.<sup>144</sup>

After the closing of the Caffe Cino, the gay theater that it had nurtured continued to evolve. Two-and-a-half weeks after the Cino's very last performance on March 17, 1968, Mart Crowley's play *The Boys in the Band* (1968) premiered Off-Broadway at Theater Four. Running for more than 1,000 performances (and later turned into a 1970 movie of the same name), the play continues to be controversial, but it also raised broader public

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<sup>143</sup> “Caffe Cino,” In the Life.

<sup>144</sup> Quoted in Charlotte Canning, *Feminist Theatres in the USA: Staging Women's Experiences* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 50.

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awareness of the LGBT community as well as gay plays and playwrights. It also helped shape gay activism in the years ahead; as gay rights activist Vito Russo wrote in his groundbreaking book, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (1981), “The internalized guilt of eight gay men at a Manhattan birthday party formed the best and most potent argument for gay liberation ever offered in a popular art form.” Another important development was Doric Wilson’s co-founding of The Other Side of Silence (better known as TOSOS) in 1974, the first professional gay theater company in New York City and still active today as TOSOS II.<sup>145</sup> Wilson also became a gay rights activist, joining the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) – the most influential American gay liberation political activist organization in the early 1970s – soon after the 1969 Stonewall uprising.

In *Gay Plays*, Hoffman concludes that the history of the Caffe Cino, the start of Off-Off-Broadway, and the emergence of gay theater are inextricably linked to each other.<sup>146</sup> As the authors of *The Gay and Lesbian Theatrical Legacy* note

The importance and lasting significance of the Caffe Cino can be more fully appreciated when one realizes that during that era no other places existed where unknown playwrights could try out experimental work on a shoestring budget or where material could be presented that would have been shocking to the vast majority of the downtown audience. ... In providing such a venue, Cino was meeting not only his personal needs for artistic expression but the communal needs of a fledgling homosexual community that was taking its own first steps toward recognition and validation.<sup>147</sup>

The continuing influence of the Cino can be found not only on the New York and American stages, but also in venues worldwide. It helped nurture and inspire a generation of young American playwrights – the majority of whom were openly gay – whose critically acclaimed work during and after the Cino era received numerous accolades, including Pulitzer Prizes, Tony Awards, and Obie Awards, and brought American theater into the modern era by solidifying Off-Off-Broadway as its own respected art form in the 1960s. The Cino also played a critical role in providing a safe space for LGBT people in the pre-Stonewall era, a time when they were not allowed to exist openly without legal, professional, and/or personal consequences. As a result, gay-themed plays were exposed to mixed audiences year-round as never before. *The Gay & Lesbian Theatrical Legacy* states, “...perhaps Joe Cino’s most honorable accomplishment is that, as an openly and unapologetically gay man in an incredibly repressive age and society, he put himself and his establishment on the line to foster the first honest,

<sup>145</sup> “History,” *TOSOS, The Other Side of Silence*, <http://www.tososnyc.org/history-2>.

<sup>146</sup> Hoffman, *Gay Plays*.

<sup>147</sup> Harbin, Marra, and Schanke, 95.

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literate, and compassionate portrayals of homosexuality to appear on the New York stage.”<sup>148</sup> Nearly sixty years after it first opened its doors at 31 Cornelia Street in Greenwich Village, the Caffe Cino has left a profound legacy on the American dramatic landscape.

**NOTE:** The author would like to thank Magie Dominic for being an attentive resource during the preparation of this nomination and for providing an invaluable oral history while touring the former Caffe Cino space at 31 Cornelia Street.

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 98.

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### Appendix

The following list includes short biographies of a selection of notable playwrights, directors, and actors who were associated with the Caffe Cino. To assist the reader in understanding the significant impact that the LGBT community has had on Off-Off-Broadway theater, gay theater, and the Caffe Cino, LGBT people are noted with an asterisk (\*).

Robert Dahdah (1926-2017) was an American director, most notably for *Dames at Sea* (1966), a musical that introduced teenage Bernadette Peters and was the longest running and most successful show at the Caffe Cino, and likely the longest running show in Off-Off-Broadway at that time. Dahdah also directed and co-wrote the book and score for the Off-Broadway musical *Curley McDimple* (1967), which also starred Peters during a successful run. In addition to the Cino, he was associated with La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club and the Theater for the New City. He directed plays by a number of Cino playwrights, including Robert Heide's hit *The Bed* (1965) and works by Lanford Wilson and Robert Patrick. He later appeared in small roles in films that included *The Godfather* (1972) and *Three Days of the Condor* (1975).<sup>149</sup>

Johnny Dodd\* (1941-1991) was an American lighting designer known for his innovative work in the downtown theater scene and was active until shortly before his death from AIDS-related complications. His career began at the Caffe Cino in 1961 and he later worked at such venues as the New York Poets Theatre, Judson Dance Theatre, Judson Poets Theatre, New Bowery Theatre, La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, Theatre Genesis, Theater for the New City, and many other performance venues in New York City, the country, and overseas. He won a 1967 Obie Award for the lighting design for three plays, including *The Madness of Lady Bright*.<sup>150</sup>

Tom Eyen\* (1940-1991) was an American playwright best known for writing the book and lyrics for the hit Broadway musical *Dreamgirls* (1981), for which he won a Tony Award for best book for a musical and a Grammy Award for best cast album. Eyen, one of the most prolific and popular playwrights in the early years of Off-Off-Broadway theater, wrote thirty-five experimental plays in the 1960s and 1970s and was associated with the Cino and La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, in particular. In the mid-1960s he formed his own company, the Theater of the Eye. A selection of Eyen's work includes *Why Hannah's Skirt Won't Stay Down* (1964), *The Dirtiest Show in Town* (1970), *Women Behind Bars* (1974), and *The Neon Woman* (1979). His musical *Miss Nefertiti Regrets* (1965) introduced a young Bette Midler to the New York stage; Eyen would go on to

<sup>149</sup> Magie Dominic, "Robert Dahdah, 89, early Off Broadway writer/director," *The Villager*, February 25, 2016.

<sup>150</sup> *Johnny!*, 110-137. A thorough list of Dodd's work can be found here.

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contribute material to Midler's first network special, *Ol' Red Hair Is Back* (1976), for which he received an Emmy nomination.<sup>151</sup>

Neil Flanagan\* (1934-1986) was an American actor and director who starred in the title role of the Cino's breakthrough hit, *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964), for which he won a 1967 Obie Award. He won a second Obie in 1976 for his contributions to the development of the Off-Off-Broadway movement. Flanagan also appeared in several Broadway productions, including *Sheep on the Runway* (1970), *The Secret Affairs of Mildred Wild* (1972), *The Play's the Thing* (1973), *Knock, Knock* (1976), and *Beethoven's Teeth* (1984). He died of AIDS-related complications.<sup>152</sup>

Paul Foster\* (1931- ) is an American playwright, director, and producer whose plays staged at the Caffe Cino include *Balls* (1964) and *Hurrah for the Bridge* (1965). In 1961, then an unknown playwright, he worked with Ellen Stewart to set up the first home of what would become known as La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club. He was also La MaMa's first president and, in addition to the two plays above, a selection of his plays staged there include *The Recluse* (1964), *The Madonna in the Orchard* (1965), and *Satyricon* (1972). Foster is the recipient of fellowships from the Rockefeller Foundation and the Guggenheim as well as awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the British Arts Council.<sup>153</sup>

John Guare (1938- ) is an American playwright, born in New York City, whose staged works at the Caffe Cino include *The Loveliest Afternoon of the Year* (1966), *Something I'll Tell You Tuesday* (1966), and *A Day for Surprises* (1967). A selection of his many awards include an Obie Award for *Muzeeka* (1967); the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, an Obie Award, and the Outer Critics Circle Award for *The House of Blue Leaves* (1971); a Tony Award for best musical and best libretto, Drama Desk Awards for lyrics and book, and the New York Drama Circle Award for best musical for *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1972); the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, Hull-Warriner Award, and Obie Award for *Six Degrees of Separation* (1990); and multiple national and international awards for his screenplay for *Atlantic City* (1981). Guare's plays have been staged at the Public Theatre's New York Shakespeare Festival (and was its playwright-in-residence), Lincoln Center, various Broadway theaters, and other venues around the country and abroad.<sup>154</sup>

<sup>151</sup> Stephen Holden, "Tom Eyen, 50, Prolific Playwright Specializing in Off Off Broadway," *The New York Times*, May 28, 1991; Burt A. Folkart, "Tom Eyen, 50; 'Dreamgirls' Writer, Lyricist," *Los Angeles Times*, May 28, 1991.

<sup>152</sup> "Neil Flanagan," Obituaries, *The New York Times*, June 7, 1986; "Neil Flanagan," Internet Broadway Database, <http://bit.ly/2hOA0tD>.

<sup>153</sup> "Paul Foster," Off-Center, *Primary Stages Off-Broadway Oral History Project*, <http://bit.ly/2wPVN6Q>; John Gruen, "A Pushcart Named La Mama," *New York Magazine*, July 22, 1968, 42-45.

<sup>154</sup> Jane Kathleen Curry, *John Guare: A Research and Production Sourcebook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 1-4.



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Helen Hanft (1934-2013) was an American actress, born in the Bronx, who became known as the “Queen of Off-Off-Broadway” for her portrayal as the title character in Tom Eyan’s *Why Hanna’s Skirt Won’t Stay Down* (1965). During this time, she inspired a then-unknown Bette Midler, who later acknowledged that she incorporated Hanft’s self-described “ballsy, lude [sic], brassy, Jewish woman” into her own performance style. In addition to the Cino, Hanft performed at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club and the Public Theater. Between 1965 and 1975 she appeared in 75 productions. She later had small screen roles, such as the Woody Allen movies *Manhattan* (1979), *Stardust Memories* (1980), and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985).<sup>155</sup>

Robert Heide\* (1939- ) is an American playwright whose work at the Caffe Cino includes *The Bed* (1965) and *Moon* (1968). *The Bed* ran for about 150 performances at the Cino and was turned into Andy Warhol’s first experimental split-screen film of the same name (the film was later restored by the Museum of Modern Art). Heide also wrote plays for La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, the Cherry Lane Theater, the Manhattan Theater Club, New York Theater Strategy, Theater for the New City, and numerous theaters and universities across the United States and abroad. He wrote *Lupe* (1966), directed by Warhol and starring Edie Sedgwick, and appeared in two Warhol films, *Dracula/Batman* (1964) and *Camp* (1965).<sup>156</sup>

William M. Hoffman\* (1939-2017) was an American playwright, born in New York City, whose first play, *Thank You, Miss Victoria* (1965), was staged at the Caffe Cino. He also wrote for La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club. In the post-Cino era, Hoffman wrote several plays and musicals produced in New York. In response to the AIDS epidemic, he wrote his critically acclaimed play, *As Is* (1985), produced by The Glines (a gay theater company) and the Circle Repertory Company, and winner of the Obie Award for Playwriting and the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play; it later became the first AIDS-themed play to appear on Broadway and was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Play. He also wrote the groundbreaking libretto for John Corigliano’s opera *The Ghosts of Versailles* (1991), the first new opera performed at the Metropolitan Opera since 1967. He wrote about gay and lesbian playwrights in the *New American Plays* series and in *Gay Plays: A First Collection* (1979), and was a theater professor at Lehman College at the City University of New York until his death.<sup>157</sup>

H. M. Koutoukas\* (1937-2010) was an American playwright, director, and actor, and is associated with more than 150 productions throughout his career. Plays at the Caffe Cino include *Medea or Maybe the Stars May Understand or Veiled Strangers* (1965) and *With Creatures Make My Way* (1965). In 1966, he received an Obie Award for his contributions to Off-Off-Broadway theater. Koutoukas was also associated with the Electric

<sup>155</sup> Paul Vitello, “Helen Hanft, Master of Camp Way Off Broadway, Dies at 79,” *The New York Times*, June 5, 2013.

<sup>156</sup> Harbin, Marra, and Schanke, 189-190.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 196-199; Sam Roberts, “William M. Hoffman, Who Wrote the Pioneering AIDS Play ‘As Is,’ Dies at 78,” *The New York Times*, May 1, 2017.

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Circus, Judson Poets Theater, and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, where he won acclaim for his performances in the company's revivals. He ran the School for Gargoyles, a theater workshop in Manhattan that trained the likes of Jerome Ragni and James Rado, the writers of the musical *Hair* (1967), director Tom O'Horgan, and actor and playwright Harvey Fierstein. Koutoukas was also a founding member of the Chamber Theater Group and, in 2003, he won the Robert Chelsey Award for lesbian and gay playwrighting. He is remembered as the "quintessential Off-Off-Broadway dramatist."<sup>158</sup>

Marshall W. Mason\* (1940- ) is an American director and producer who, with playwright Lanford Wilson, formed what would become the longest collaboration between a director and playwright in American theater history while both were associated with the Caffe Cino and La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club (he has directed more than sixty of Wilson's plays). They both were founders of the acclaimed Circle Repertory Company, with Mason serving as Artistic Director, which earned him the 1979 Theatre World Award and the 1977 Margo Jones Award for supporting the development of new playwrights and actors. He also directed works at the Judson Poets Theatre, Broadway theaters, and national and international venues. He has won five Obie Awards for Outstanding Direction and a sixth Obie Award for Sustained Achievement in 1983. In addition to being awarded the Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre in 2016, Mason has directed twelve Broadway productions and was nominated for five Tony Award nominations for his direction of *Knock Knock* (1976), *Talley's Folly* (1980), *The Fifth of July* (1980), *As Is* (1985), and *Burn This* (1987).<sup>159</sup>

Andy Milligan\* (1929-1991) was an American director and screenwriter who, at the Caffe Cino, directed the homoerotic productions of Jean Genet's *The Maids* and *Deathwatch* in 1961 as well as Tennessee Williams's *One Arm* in 1962. He also directed at La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club. He also formed the Troupe Theater and Tottenville Players and filmed several of his movies in his Staten Island home, which he dubbed "Hollywood Central." His short film *Vapors* (1965) took place at the well-known gay bathhouse St. Mark's Baths in the East Village. Before his untimely death from AIDS-related complications, Milligan made twenty-seven films mostly in the horror genre, several of which became cult classics.<sup>160</sup>

Claris Nelson\* (c. 1941- ) is an American playwright and actress who was the most prolific of a relatively small group of female playwrights at the Caffe Cino. She is the only known lesbian playwright at the Cino. Nelson is most often credited as Claris Erickson; according to fellow Cino playwright Robert Patrick in his Caffe Cino blog, "Erickson" was Nelson's "Don't Tell Equity" name (likely meaning that she used this stage name in order

<sup>158</sup> Harbin, Marra, and Schanke, 237-240; William Grimes, "H. M. Koutoukas, Author of Surrealist Plays, Dies at 72," *The New York Times*, March 18, 2010.

<sup>159</sup> "Marshall W. Mason," Off-Center, *Primary Stages Off-Broadway Oral History Project*, <http://bit.ly/2vqRPns>; "Marshall W. Mason," *Internet Broadway Database*, <http://bit.ly/2wPVPvp>; "Marshall W. Mason," *Lortel Archives Internet Off-Broadway Database*, <http://bit.ly/2wC1Uwg>.

<sup>160</sup> Rob Craig, *Gutter Auteur: The Films of Andy Milligan* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2013), 22-24.

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to avoid issues with Actor's Equity, of which she appears to have been a member). Nelson's plays at the Cino include *The Rue Garden* (1962), *The Clown* (1962), *Neon is the Night* (1964), *The Carders* (1964), *The Girl on the BBC* (1965), and *A Road Where Wolves Run* (1965). The 1967 revival of *The Clown* was the first play to be staged at the Cino following Joe Cino's death. She also toured internationally as a performer with La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club and, in later years, with the Circle Repertory Company.<sup>161</sup>

Tom O'Horgan\* (1924-2009) was an American director best known for directing the hit Broadway musicals *Hair* (1968), for which he received a Tony nomination for best direction of a musical, and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971). He also directed other Broadway plays and musicals, including *Lenny* (1971), *Inner City* (1971), *Dude* (1972), *The Leaf People* (1975), *I Won't Dance* (1981), and *The Three Musketeers* (1984). His early work at the Caffe Cino included directing *A Masque*, *Love and Variations*, and *Love and Vexations*, all of which were staged in 1963. O'Horgan was also associated with La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club and also toured with them in Europe. He received a 1967 Obie Award for Best Off-Off-Broadway Director of that year, three Drama Desk Awards, and the 2006 Artistic Achievement Award from the New York Innovative Theatre Awards. He was also named theatrical director of the year by Newsweek in 1968. O'Horgan was also known for his parties and salons attended by theatrical and artistic people, such as Norman Mailer and Beverly Sills, which he held at his loft at 840 Broadway in Manhattan.<sup>162</sup>

Robert Patrick\* (1937- ) is an American playwright, director, and actor who visited the Caffe Cino immediately after arriving in New York City and eventually wrote six plays there. His first-ever play was *The Haunted Host* (1964), which premiered at the Cino; in one of its many revivals, actor Harvey Fierstein performed his first non-drag role in 1975. He is also associated with the Old Reliable Theatre Tavern and other theaters around the country and abroad. His successful play *Kennedy's Children* (1975), based in part on his days at the Caffe Cino, led to international acclaim. Patrick's numerous accolades include the International Thespian Society Founders Award for Services to Theatre and to Youth (its first openly gay recipient), the Robert Chesley Foundation Award for Lifetime Achievement in Gay Playwriting, the New York Innovative Theatre Foundation, Artistic Achievement Award, and the Charles Rodman Award for 50 Years of Service to Gay Theatre. He has authored over sixty plays and estimates that about one-third of his early plays featured overtly gay content. *Blue is for Boys* (1983) was the first play about gay teenagers, and *The Trial of Socrates* (1986) was the first gay play to be produced by the City of New York.<sup>163</sup>

<sup>161</sup> Robert Patrick, *Caffe Cino*, <http://bit.ly/2uVLKfl>; Frank Rich, "Stage: 'As Is,' About AIDS, Opens," *The New York Times*, March 11, 1985; Mel Gussow, "Theater in Review," *The New York Times*, May 6, 1992; Frank, "Plays Performed at the Caffe Cino."

<sup>162</sup> Douglas Martin, "Tom O'Horgan, 84, Director of 'Hair,' Is Dead," *The New York Times*, January 13, 2009; "Tom O'Horgan," *Internet Broadway Database*, <http://bit.ly/2vy5zNb>.

<sup>163</sup> Harbin, Marra, and Schanke, 308-311.

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Bernadette Peters (1948- ) is an American actress, born in Queens, whose critically-acclaimed career began with her breakthrough performance in *Dames at Sea*, staged at the Caffe Cino in 1966. She also performed in the Off-Broadway version and won a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Actress in a Musical in 1968. In that year, she also won a Theatre World Award for Outstanding Broadway Debut for her role in *George M!* (1968). Peters is a celebrated Broadway actress, particularly in musicals, and has won two Tony Awards (and five other nominations) and three Drama Desk Awards (and five other nominations). A selection of critically-acclaimed shows she has appeared in include *On the Town* (1971 revival), *Mack and Mabel* (1974), *Sunday in the Park with George* (1984), *Song and Dance* (1985), *Into the Woods* (1987), *The Goodbye Girl* (1993), *Annie Get Your Gun* (1999 revival), *Gypsy* (2003 revival), and *Follies* (2011 revival). She has also appeared in numerous film and television roles, and, as a singer, has recorded six solo albums and several singles.<sup>164</sup>

Sam Shepard (1943-2017) was an American playwright and actor whose Obie Award-winning play *Icarus's Mother* (1965) was staged at the Caffe Cino. He was also associated with La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club and Theatre Genesis. A selection of his more than fifty-five plays include *True West* (1980), *Fool for Love* (1983), and *Buried Child* (1978), for which he received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama (the first two plays were nominated for Pulitzers). *Buried Child* and *True West* were nominated for Tony Awards for best play. Shepard also wrote songs with John Cale and Bob Dylan, most notably "Brownsville Girl" (1986) for Dylan, and acted in television and films; he earned an Oscar nomination for best supporting actor in *The Right Stuff* (1983). Other awards include ten Obie Awards for writing and directing, the Gold Medal for Drama from the American Academy of Arts and Letters Awards, three Drama Desk Awards, and the PEN/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater Award as a master American dramatist in 2009.<sup>165</sup>

Roberta Sklar\* (?- ) is an American director who began her career at the Caffe Cino and La MaMa ETC in the 1960s, a time when directors were predominantly men. A selection of her credits as a pioneering female director at the Cino include *The Flight Into Egypt* (1963), *With Creatures Make My Way* (1965), and *The Bed* (1965). Sklar was also associated with the Open Theatre, Theatre Four, and the performance space at the Washington Square Methodist United Church, a progressive church in Greenwich Village. She would go on to co-found the Women's Experimental Theater in 1976 where she would serve as co-artistic director and co-author *The Daughters Cycle Trilogy: Daughters, Sister/Sister, and Electra Speaks*. Sklar currently works as an activist for LGBT rights.<sup>166</sup>

<sup>164</sup> "Bernadette Peters," *Internet Broadway Database*, <http://bit.ly/2vxKUuV>.

<sup>165</sup> Ben Brantley, "Sam Shepard, Actor and Pulitzer-Winning Playwright, Is Dead at 73," *The New York Times*, July 31, 2017; "List of Awards and Nominations Received by Sam Shepard," *Wikipedia*, <http://bit.ly/2vW7so2>.

<sup>166</sup> Roberta Sklar, "Reflections," *Women in American Theatre*, Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins, eds. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006), 317; Cornelia Brunner, "Roberta Sklar: Toward Creating A Women's Theatre," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, June 1980), 23-40.

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Shirley Stoler (1929-1999) was an American actress, born in Brooklyn, who was best known for her film roles as Martha Beck in *The Honeymoon Killers* (1970) and the Prison Camp Commandant in *Seven Beauties* (1975), for which she won critical acclaim. She considered herself the first plus-size dramatic actress at a time when women her size were cast in comedy roles. She was associated with the Caffe Cino in its earliest years, with roles in plays such as Tennessee Williams's *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen* (1953) and *Camino Real* (1961). Stoler also performed at the Living Theatre and La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, and made her Broadway debut in Edward Albee's *Lolita* (1981).<sup>167</sup>

Ronald Tavel\* (1936-2009) was an American playwright and screenwriter, born in Brooklyn, whose early plays in 1965 formed the beginning of the theatrical genre known as the Theatre of the Ridiculous. In addition to the Caffe Cino, Tavel wrote for La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, Judson Poets Theatre, Theatre Genesis, the Public Theater, the American Place Theatre, and the Theater for the New City. His first commercial success was the musical *Gorilla Queen* (1967). Tavel is also known for having written scripts or appeared in more than 20 films by Andy Warhol; their first collaboration resulted in Tavel's screenplay for *Harlot* (1964), which is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art. Some of his best-known Warhol collaborations were *Hanoi Hannah* and *Their Town*, both part of *Chelsea Girls* (1966). *Their Town* was later turned into a musical and renamed *Boy on the Straight-Back Chair*, which earned him an Obie Award in 1969.<sup>168</sup>

Jean-Claude van Itallie\* (1936- ) is a Belgian-born American playwright whose play *War* (1965) at the Caffe Cino was interrupted by the March 1965 fire that damaged the coffeehouse's interior. He is also associated with La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club, the Open Theater (where he was the principal playwright), the Theater for the New City, the Manhattan Theatre Club, and the Public Theater. His critically acclaimed trilogy *America Hurrah* (1966) premiered at Off-Broadway's Pocket Theatre and later ran at the Royal Court Theatre in London; the play won the Outer Critics Circle Award for Best Production and the Drama Desk Award, among other accolades. His play *The Serpent* (1968) premiered in Rome and won an Obie Award. In addition to writing plays, he has also taught playwrighting and performance at various universities, including Columbia, the New School for Social Research, Princeton, Middlebury, and Yale.<sup>169</sup>

Jeff Weiss\* (1938- ) is an American playwright and actor whose work at the Caffe Cino includes *A Funny Walk Home* (1967). He has also been associated with La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club and the Mercer Arts Center; in the late 1960s, Weiss and his partner formed the Good Medicine and Company, a long-running

<sup>167</sup> "Shirley Stoler, 69, Actress Hailed For Her Role in 'Seven Beauties,'" *The New York Times*, February 28, 1999; John Willis, ed., *Theatre World: 1998-1999 Season* (New York: Applause Theatre & Cinema Books, 2002), 265.

<sup>168</sup> Michael Feingold, "Ronald Tavel, 1941-2009," *The Village Voice*, March 25, 2009; Dennis Hevesi, "Ronald Tavel, Proudly Ridiculous Writer, Dies at 72," *The New York Times*, March 27, 2009.

<sup>169</sup> Alex Gildzen and Alisa Gonzalez, "Jean-Claude van Itallie Papers," revised by Margaret Castellani, Special Collections and Archives, Kent State University, August 2010.

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experimental storefront theater in the East Village. He has won several Obie Awards, including one for his play *Hot Keys* (1992). Weiss has also appeared on the Broadway stage in such productions as *MacBeth* (1988 revival), *Carousel* (1994 revival), *The Iceman Cometh* (1999 revival), and *Henry IV* (2003 revival). He received the Robert Chelsey Award in 2000.<sup>170</sup>

Doric Wilson\* (1939-2011) was an American playwright who was the Caffe Cino's first resident playwright in 1961. That year, his four plays – *Babel Babel Little Tower*, *Pretty People*, *And He Made A Her*, and *Now She Dances!* (one act version) – helped establish the Cino as a venue for new works; the latter two were also early gay-themed original plays. In the post-Cino years, Wilson was a founding member of the Circle Repertory Company and the Barr/Wilde/Albee Playwright's Unit. In 1974, he co-founded The Other Side of Silence (better known as TOSOS), the first professional gay theater company in New York City and still active today as TOSOS II. The company has staged the works of several notable gay playwrights, such as Noël Coward, Christopher Hampton, Terrence McNally, Sandra Scoppettone, Robert Patrick, and Lanford Wilson. Wilson's other gay-themed plays include *The West Street Gang* (1977), *Forever After* (1980), and *Street Theater* (1982; titled *Stonewall 69* outside the United States). These works became staples of the emerging Gay Theater circuit and were widely performed nationally and internationally to critical acclaim. In 1994, Wilson was the first recipient of the Robert Chelsey Award for Lifetime Achievement in Gay Theatre.<sup>171</sup>

Lanford Wilson\* (1937-2011) was an American playwright who was often labeled as the "Populist Playwright" and the "American Poet of Loss and Endurance." With eleven plays written for the Caffe Cino, Wilson was the café's most prolific playwright of original work. *The Madness of Lady Bright* (1964) was the Cino's breakthrough hit, Wilson's first significant gay-themed play, and broke Off-Off-Broadway performance records at that time with a run of 250 performances. Wilson was also associated with La MaMa ETC and co-founded the Circle Repertory Company in 1969, considered one of the most important Off-Broadway theaters of the 1970s and 1980s. His groundbreaking play *Hot l Baltimore* (1973) established him as one of America's premiere playwrights when it opened Off-Off-Broadway and later Off-Broadway; the play won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best American Play, the Outer Circle Critics Award, and an Obie Award for Best Off-Broadway Play. In 1980, Wilson was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in Drama for his play *Talley's Folley*, which also became a hit Broadway show that same year. Many of Wilson's plays feature gay characters, including his first full-length play *Balm in Gilead* (1965), *The Great Nebula in Orion* (1972), and *Fifth of July* (1977).<sup>172</sup>

<sup>170</sup> Leslie Bennetts, "Success Catches Up with Weiss in 'Hamlet,'" *The New York Times*, March 24, 1986; "Jeff Weiss," *Internet Broadway Database*, <http://bit.ly/2vYtrKz>.

<sup>171</sup> Dennis Hevesi, "Doric Wilson, Playwright and Mainstay of Gay Theater, Dies at 72," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2011; "Doric Wilson," *TOSOS: The Other Side of Silence*, <http://www.tososnyc.org/people/doric-wilson>.

<sup>172</sup> Harbin, Marra, and Schanke, 385-388; Margalit Fox, "Lanford Wilson, Pulitzer Prize-Winning Playwright, Dies at 73," *The New York Times*, March 24, 2011.

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### Verbal Boundary Description

The boundary is indicated by a heavy line on the attached map.

### Boundary Justification

The boundary was drawn to include the lot historically associated with 31 Cornelia St.

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