7-2018

Len Berkman on the Caffe Cino

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The following memoir appeared in CAFFE CINO, volume 1, number 1, July 2018, pages 20-22 (double-column). Journal editor, Stephen MacMahon. Volume editor, Daniel Talbott. The editors added my name to the published title, which became "Len Berkman on the Caffe Cino."

Since Caffe Cino was not only theatrical at its core (though not at its outset), since food, folk music, and other communal Village dimensions were infused with its basic existence and impact, I'd like -- in this flash of memoir -- to position the Cino within the magnitude of a Brooklyn teen-age male's experience of the Village at that time (a very different take on the 1950s relationship to the 1960s than what we so often see portrayed as the seemingly bland, conventional, apolitical "Donna Reid" 1950s.) It's so agonized and ironic to me that the ultimately suicidal trajectory of Joe Cino's life fostered what, by contrast, became for me life-saving, soul-saving, and continues in that vein to this day.

I never 'hung out' at Caffe Cino, nor at any other singular locale in the Village of the '50s and early '60s. As the '60s, advanced I gravitated toward The Bitter End Cafe and The Cafe au Go Go for their music scenes, and of course toward The Strand for its literary finds. (The Strand was already as rare an independent book shop in the expanse of Manhattan and all of NYC in that era as we are given to bewailing about the rarity of independent book shops today) Though occasionally I'd wander the Village with a friend (and there was always a special excitement about choosing to head *to the Village* with a friend -- rather than, say, to Madison Square Garden for a NY Rangers ice hockey game), I'd mainly wander the Village alone, feeling my sheer existence in that part of town a risk, a statement about myself beyond my grasp, an experience that would become comparable to a secret handshake whenever I'd discover a friend who quietly did the same inwardly turbulent roaming.

Whatever the time of day, whether a performance beckoned or not, to stop by Caffe Cino or other 'places with tables and chairs' -- as I imaged their welcome to me -- subtly announced an adventure, a chance (interior as much as outward) to transform my world, and myself within that world. If I chatted with a total stranger, I would not need to travel an internal stretch of miles, as I would find myself doing in any other part of NYC, before either of us said what was truly on our minds and openly wondered about each other and where our happenstance moment together might lead. In one sense, I was ridiculously innocent of others' sexual intent all around me; in another sense, I recognized their intent and -- I'm sure this struck many as fatuous -- wanted to let them know of my respect for whatever it was that drove them even as I had no desire to participate. Exchanges of life-stories, exchanges of self-questioning, exchanges of what we dubbed the extraordinary mysteries of human nature and human

achievement, were what we prized, even as we parted with only memories to retain, not further intimacy to develop. The Village, with an atmosphere of what I deemed provocatively loud silence, allowed such risky, deeply honest, ephemera. As epitomized by Caffe Cino, and later La Mama Etc., self-exposure -- on'stage' and off -- was an instant mutual treasure, not only induced and traded without judgment but transpiring beyond the realm of where judgment has the slightest role to play. Though I could readily 'identify' myself in standard terms -- as News Editor of the Midwood Argus, as stringer for the Brooklyn Eagle, as advertisement script-writer for Columbia University's WKCR-FM, as Yale Drama School MFA playwright and classmate of the soon splendidly jet-propelled and Cino-embraced playwright John Guare -- I saw myself as a thwarted freak everywhere else but among those Village streets and haunts.

A prime way I came to know a different order of strangers at that juncture in my life, strangers who would become long-time cherished friends, was to send them letters when I'd first come upon and quickly fall in love with their work. As but one instance, the instance that brought me to realize what it would be like to bring each Village destination within strolling distance rather than count each a miraculous reward at the end of a Brooklyn-Manhattan-Transit subway stop, I came to know Maurice Sendak in exactly that way, exchanging letters with him when I was 16 or 17, he 26 or 27, for over a year before we finally met at his 3rd floor walk-up Village apartment. Mo was strictly an illustrator then, not a 'name', who had begun to write his own self-illustrated children's books (*Kenny's Window* the first) that I found far more interesting than my reading of D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* the moment I over-heard one of my younger sisters reading Sendak to my baby sister with curious involvement and glee. Walking along the Village streets with Maurice, passing by any of my previously lonelier cafe, theater, or music destinations, I felt the very wind blow differently. And even at moments of our intense exclamations or raucous laughter, no one looked twice at two men of unequal ages, sometimes pulling child-wagons of books behind them, who might well have appeared in any other part of NYC as creatures to be stared at in a zoo.

By the time I was immersed in Yale theater classes and productions, supposedly a gateway back to the Manhattan glamor that had even played siren to my hope-filled undergraduate classmates at Columbia (especially when one of them -- heralded as "gorgeous" by a cluster of the liveliest of my acquaintances while, as I viewed him, his intelligence and sensitivity warranted far more emphatic regard -- was singled out by a stunning new Off-Broadway icon, Edward Albee, whom I revered from the outset as well, to play the Angel of Death who visits Grandma in Albee's early *Sandbox*), I could not help but note the enormous gap between what was happening so zestfully in the Village of Off-Off Broadway with what was happening those very same years in Yale's

playwriting workshops that kept only Broadway and Off-Broadway in their sights. Markedly restless and adventurous in their own right, numbers of my keenly talented classmates did burst out of that glittering Yale constraint in the early ' 60s, yet not to embrace the Off-Off but to span the U.S. with new-born 'regional' theaters that, splendidly expansive of American theater ideals as they were, sustained the artistic limits of 'propriety', Caffe Cino's disregard for which made Cino all the more essential and wild an alternative.

John Guare became the quintessential exception, a playwright for whom "either or" ambitions had been replaced by "either and". In one of John's early grad-student plays, he depicted a spirited, seemingly conventional, love affair in which one of the two lovers became passionate about the purple blotches on the other one's body. One of our playwriting professors gave John some earnest caring advice: "John! This could be such a moving play, if only you'd remove those purple blotches." John would no more do that than remove the urine from his early full-length romance, *Did You Write My Name in the Snow?* Love has so much more going for it than presenting itself as pretty. Joe Cino and his community recognized that.