

The WOW Cafe is a force more than a place. Unlike many East Village performance spaces, WOW, at 330 E. 11th Street, did not begin as a location seeking work to produce but was born the other way around. Women who had been producing a vast variety of work all over the East Village sought a permanent home. Recently, during one of their weekly open staff meetings, the 15 or so women who make up the Cafe's anarchic organizing collective spoke about the origins of their café. In typical WOW fashion, women periodically wandered in and out. The Cafe's oral history, recounted at this meeting for the first time, is rich—and long enough that the tellers disagree about the details of their story. At the same time, WOW's creatively amorphous organization includes enough newcomers that some women were surprised to hear there was an extensive past.

WOW began with a dream shared by Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw. Touring in Europe in the late '70s with Spiderwoman Theater and Hot Peaches, they met several companies who wanted to perform in the United States. They also attended many women's theatre festivals in Europe and thought it was about time one took place in America. "It became clear," says Weaver, "that if it was going to be done, we were going to have to be the ones

to do it." They began to mention their vision to European companies, making it clear that the American system did not permit conditions equivalent to the ones they enjoyed in Europe; they would be unable to invite groups into a theatre that could pay even a small fee or accommodate them. "You would have to come and produce yourselves; that's how we do it," Weaver told them. Peggy Shaw, tossing in wry interjections throughout Weaver's narrative, adds with a sigh recalling exhaustion, "We didn't think they'd really fall for it. We said we'd do it, and then, all of a sudden, we had to."

And all of a sudden is how it happened. They had the idea in May 1980, and the first Women's One World (WOW) Festival took place the following October. Without any personal capital or funding, and not enough time to apply for grants, Weaver and Shaw, forming "Allied Farces" with Jordi Mark and Pamela Camhe, began to work fanatically to create a festival that would feature international groups but also highlight national and New York women performers. Acknowledging that music and dance already had healthy circuits in place, they concentrated on theatre, with the European festival as their deliberate model. There, one could pay one admission to see two or three shows, a movie, sit in a café and talk, and dance afterwards. "We wanted to create that sort of multimedia environment," says Weaver, "so we did. God only knows how."

One tactic was to amass a crew of volunteers, who became the backbone of the project. Throughout the summer of 1980, they produced benefits, usually in the form of wild costume parties, in donated spaces. In addition to giving the Festival exposure, these benefits acquainted the women with the vagaries of producing, accustomed them to the technical demands of their performance space, and collected a following. "We didn't raise much money," Weaver says, "but it did give us a lot in the long run in terms of exposure and experience, and we developed an audience."

Working out of the Allcraft Center on St. Marks Place (the old Electric Circus), Allied Farces had to put up their sets right before they went on and break them down the same night. By the time the Festival arrived, they had acquired an adept technical crew. The Festival ran for two weeks with two, sometimes three, performances a night and occasional afternoon shows. Groups came from Europe, paying their own way and sleeping on floors of friends of the Festival. "We couldn't offer much," Weaver explains, "but just having a spot to perform in New York was a big deal for them. And we got them some press. That actually generated enough interest that they could come back on their own later, as Beryl and the Perils did." "We couldn't pay them," Shaw adds, "but they got a lot of attention and made a lot of contacts."

When the Festival ended, the Allcraft management, pleased with its success, offered its organizers the space to keep going. "'Why don't we do *what?*,' we said," explains Weaver, "but space was at a premium, and we felt that if someone was offering us a women's performance space, we couldn't very well refuse." They stayed until March.

In the ensuing months, they produced dance, theatre, and poetry by women every Wednesday night and sometimes on Thursday nights, splitting the receipts with the performers. As word about the space got out, resumé's and brochures from performers baraged them. But just as their reputation was growing and their procedures were taking shape, they got locked out of the Allcraft Center. One night the Flamboyant Ladies, a black lesbian group, performed a show that Weaver describes as "very, very hot, very sensual." "It was beautiful," says Shaw, "but a little too sexy for the Center." It happened that near the end of the show there was a fire in the building next door that had nothing to do with the performance, but it caused some damage to the Allcraft. The next time the WOW staff came to the space, they found padlocks on the door.

There is no animosity between WOW and the Allcraft manager; the women understood that Allcraft had been under investigation by the CETA Board that funded them and were

afraid of losing money. "There had been some growing tension, some homophobic kind of tension, because of that," says Weaver, "but they really had been generous. We did pay them a portion of our proceeds but not nearly as much as they could have made if they had rented the space out."

Weaver, Shaw, and the current WOW organizers do not seem disconcerted by the implicit indirect censorship from the CETA foundation. They had, after all, if not by design, acquired a reputation for producing lesbian work and expected certain attacks. Though their policy was to produce any work written or directed by a woman, or that presented a woman's sensibility, many of their benefits depended on creating environments that, depending on the theme, might include such attractions as kissing booths. However, they made no deliberate attempt to appeal exclusively to lesbians. "You didn't have to be a lesbian to get into the shows," explains Shaw, "but most of the people who came were." Then she adds jokingly, "Most either came that way or ended up that way."

Locked out, in any case, but booked for the next three months, the WOW brigade searched for a space and eventually found the ballroom at the Ukrainian Home on 2nd Avenue. It was difficult to create a congenial atmosphere in the cavernous, 86-year-old theatre, but bringing in platforms, folding chairs, and electricity enabled them to produce a month of Wednesday performances and some benefits. In the meantime, they made a connection with the University of the Streets when it was still, in Shaw's words, "just a tacky little storefront," and they staged benefits there as well.

By now it was April 1981, and time, they felt, to plan another festival. This time, they knew they wanted to include an all-day café space where performers and spectators could



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hang out, and they immediately made arrangements with University of the Streets. Wanting to expand the Festival's scope, they also booked other spaces. Again they worked without substantial funding: The October 1981 WOW Festival budget amounted to \$2-3,000. Each of its 11 days was packed with performances: "Pasta and Performance" at University of the Streets every day at 6:00 p.m., mainstage shows at 8:00 and 10:00 at the Ukrainian Home, 11:00 performances at Theatre for the New City, midnight Cabaret at the Centre Pub, and occasional films at Millenium. After a year, WOW had become a full part of the international network of women performers and attracted groups from Finland, Sweden, New Zealand and all over Europe. Some got money from their own countries, but most came over on their own just because they had heard about the previous WOW Festival.

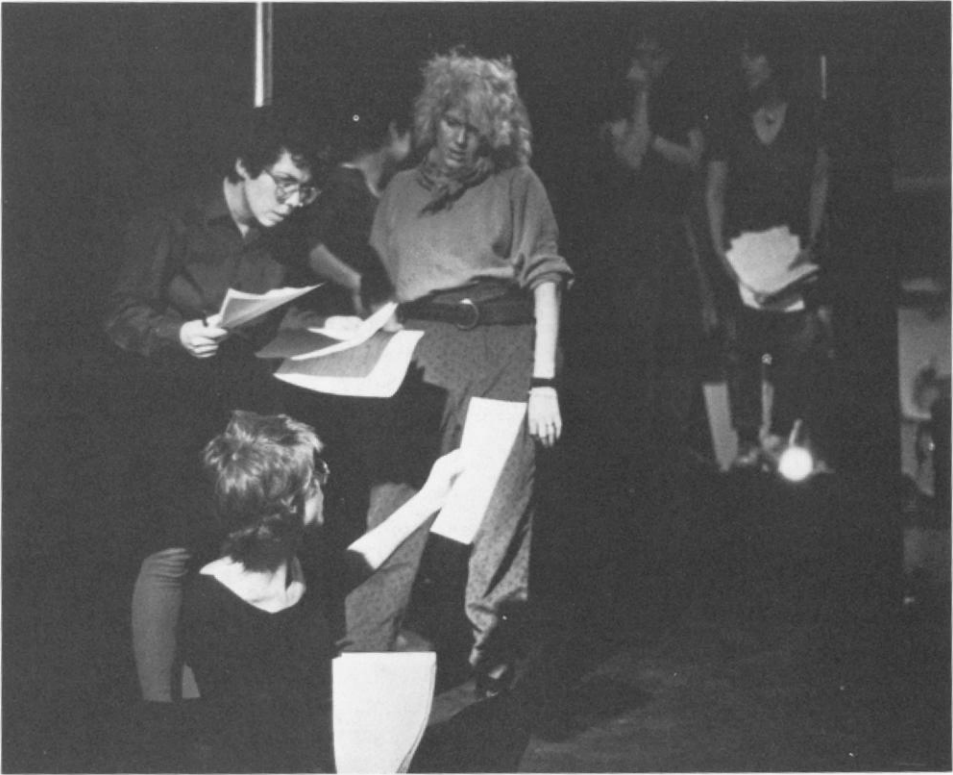
After the second Festival, artists felt that something was missing and realized that they did not want to give up the inspiration that working together had generated. "It was like there was just energy left over," Weaver explains. "There had been a place where you could just drop by and always run into someone you knew. Not only people who had been working, but also people who had been spectators really missed the energy after the Festival finished." So this arbitrary group of people—including a huge production team of designers and technicians—who had come together for the Festival, began having brunches together on Sundays and talked about creating a permanent café. According to Weaver, "This was something we always hoped would happen, and it seemed like the perfect outgrowth of the Festival."

This ad hoc brunch committee began to organize benefits at Club 57: costume affairs like the Freudian Slip party to which guests came dressed in lingerie, a Debutante Ball, and "X-rated Xmas"—which brough back one of the most controversial performers from the Festival. Diane Torr, a performance artist making her living as a go-go dancer in New Jersey, created a piece with her colleagues in which they danced and talked about their lives. Many women were upset by the show, Shaw thinks, "because they didn't know how to act, how to react, or how to be with these women. A lot of women loved it, but many objected to it politically." Never shying away from controversy, they invited Torr to work on a benefit in which she performed for an all-women audience and invited them to participate. Other benefits included a Medical Drag Ball attended by people in costumes dripping with blood and gore, who danced with their I.V.s. Club 57, an old horror movie house in the basement of a church at 57 St. Mark's Place, was one of the first clubs in the area to feature crazy theme parties. Appreciative of WOW's purpose and zaniness, they rented them the space for \$75 a night.

These benefits had financial, albeit modest, success. "All of a sudden we had five or six hundred dollars in our hands that had been raised for a café, so we started looking for spaces," says Weaver, "and one afternoon we found 330 E. 11th. We had to talk the landlord into renting it to us because he didn't really want any little lesbian theatre in his building." "We told him we wanted it for a women's resource center," Shaw explains, "but," adds Weaver, "he took one look at us and said, 'Oh. I have a son who's gay.' We had learned by then that you have to be up front right from the start because we didn't want to put our hearts into something and end up disappointed."

Since opening in March 1982, the WOW Cafe has presented innumerable poets, performers, plays, films, videos and art exhibits. Continually reconsidering the Cafe's purposes, the staff molds its flexible shape to meet its constituents' changing interests and needs. They began literally as a café, serving coffee and toasted brie sandwiches, simply as Mo Angeles says, "because we had called it a café. So we had to serve coffee."

The space was named "WOW at 330" to signify both its address and the hour, as Weaver puts it, "when girls get out of school and go out looking for fun." It was open from 3:30 until 11:00 p.m.—a feasible prospect since everyone on the staff had a key—and truly



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became a social center. "But what we really wanted," says Weaver, "was a women's performance space. We also wanted a hangout, a girls' social club." Unsure of their institutional identity, the dozen or so amorphously organized staff (anyone who showed up to an open staff meeting automatically joined the staff) argued over whether to have a pool table, what color to paint the ceiling, and whether paintings should be left on the walls during performances. "We eventually learned," Shaw says, "that you could do anything you wanted in the space when nobody else was there." Every time they would come in, they explained laughingly, someone else's paintings would be newly hung.

Without explicitly declaring their intentions for 330, its organizers expressed their plans when one of the first things they did was to construct a platform stage at one end of the room and hang a curtain. The stage, like the entire space, is barely 10 feet wide. With its floor of octagonal ceramic tiles, patterned along one side, the room seems like it might have been someone's vestibule or, even earlier, half of a dining room. Now, impossibly narrow and maybe 20 feet long, it hardly contains a dozen or so rows of folding chairs. The homemade lightboard of household dimmers sits in the center of the room, controlling a handful of small, outdoor-type reflector lamps—all the electrical system can accommodate. The backstage area is a ten feet by ten feet jumble of old props, bits of costumes, and chunks of sets. The Cafe's original excuse, an enormous coffee maker, is stashed in a corner.

In its early days, the Cafe kept afloat by selling food and memberships. For \$60 a year, members got half-price admissions to performances. Although this was not much of a



WOW Cafe's space is narrow and perhaps 20 feet long, permitting only a dozen or so rows of folding chairs to be set up for productions.

bargain since performances were not yet very regular, it offered patrons a way to support the Cafe where they "hung out." Membership reached 120 within a few months. Performance booking remained erratic until Holly Hughes emerged to take on the management of the Cafe. She instituted a number of regular events that increased the Cafe's visibility, brought more regular customers, and attracted more writers, comics and actors. She orchestrated a number of brunches, for instance, and created the popular "Talking Slide Show," where artists would show their slides and talk about their work. Variety nights also caught on, providing opportunities for many inchoate artists to work on material without having to face the risks and mechanics of mounting entire productions. Countless East Village performers got their start in these casual shows. Hughes herself developed her first piece, "Shrimp in a Basket," at the Cafe, and then "Well of Horniness," which went on to become a popular Lower East Side cult piece, playing at the Pyramid Club, Limbo Lounge and on WBAI Radio. Tammy Whynot, a character in Split Britches' most recent play, *Upwardly Mobile Home*, first appeared at a talent night. And Carmelita Tropicana, a persona created by Alina Troyano, was born almost by accident. Troyano, drawn to the Cafe because of its sense of humor, went on for an emcee who did not show up one night and, she proclaims, never came off. Recently she performed at the Chandalier and the Limelight.

After about a year, Holly Hughes was exhausted by her non-paying, full-time management of the Cafe and decided to leave. Therefore, in the spring of '83, the roughly 15 women who still comprised WOW's collective management called a retreat to determine their next steps. "What happens, unfortunately, when one person is in charge of all the

details," Weaver says, "is that the collective sort of vanishes and leaves all the little decisions up to that one person. So we had to regroup. This meeting was really a turning point for the Cafe."

The women who gathered for the weekend were tired and knew that something had to change. "We were no longer just a café," says Weaver. "Now we wanted to be serious about being a performance space, a cultural center." So they sat around a big table, and each person recommended what she would like to see happen in the coming season. They drew up a month-by-month list of the suggestions—and produced every one of them the following year.

Worried about Hughes' departure, the WOW collective remained uncertain about the Cafe's definition and wondered whether all of its functions could coexist gracefully. "We wanted to be an art space, a theatre space, a hangout, and have as much input from the community as possible," Troyano remarks, "but how do you maintain that?" As usual though, things fell into place. Because they had sketched out a calendar for the season, Weaver believes, "each month just materialized. It wasn't as if anyone was there holding us to it, it just sort of happened because the calendar had to be filled in each month ahead of time, so we just did it; it was pretty magical."

That magic was replaced by a less ethereal if equally powerful force in Fall 1983 when Susan Young took over as booking manager. "I had just moved here," she relates. "I didn't know any of these women, I hadn't seen any WOW Festivals or really knew that they had existed. But I came here and saw Split Britches perform and knew immediately that this was where I wanted to work." Since then, she has been designing WOW productions and carrying out day-to-day managerial tasks. Under her direction, informed by the collective, the Cafe has turned in slightly new directions. While continuing to book anyone who requests space, Young has also set up some regular events whose management she turns over to the groups involved. Each Sunday night from September 1984 until Christmas, for example, is directed by the Asian Lesbians of the East Coast. "Instead of taking individual bookings for a jam session here, a film showing there, we decided that this group would put together its own evenings. The outcome has been incredible: films, videos, poetry readings, music." This arrangement also serves a growing aim of the Cafe—to reach out to a more racially mixed audience.

At the same time, caféniks are beginning to rethink their policy of allowing anyone with an interest to book the Cafe, not only because they want to put their energy into producing their own work, but also because they are sometimes displeased with the results. "We still want to provide a producing service to the community," says Young, "but women come in expecting a great deal and don't give anything back to the space. There are a lot of women who aren't regulars here who come in and perform, put holes in the wall, break our light-board, and split, and don't even think of ever coming to a staff meeting or even to a performance by another woman."

More abstract issues such as the risks that works will be artistically bad, politically inconsistent with the Cafe's tacit feminism, or just poorly executed increasingly concern the staff. Yet they would rather tolerate occasional disasters than audition women for the space; that, they believe, would amount to censorship. "We're always criticized for not auditioning," Shaw complains. "We're told, 'Now that you've been around you have to have quality work.' But we feel the minute you start auditioning you become just like anybody else."

These issues may become less pressing as the Cafe moves toward its year-long goal of putting on work from within its own community—a priority not as cliqueish as it may sound since anyone who hangs around is absorbed into that community. Facing some of the difficulties posed by outside performers, Young explains, "We wondered, why are we



Peggy Shaw being fitted for a costume, for a WOW Cafe performance.

breaking our backs producing so many other women when our own work is not a priority?" This past season they decided to rectify the situation and to make concrete proposals for in-house bookings. Just as booking a calendar the year before provided the structured impetus to keep the Cafe going then, this new commitment generated creative work and pushed WOW women toward inventing and finishing new projects.

The most experienced of the WOW regulars is the Split Britches company, comprised of Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw and Deborah Margolin. Their recent work-in-progress, *Upwardly Mobile Home*, has been shown twice at the Cafe, once in the Spring of '84 and again, further developed, in the Fall. Though there is probably no such thing as a typical WOW performance, Split Britches crystallizes some of the distinguishing qualities from which one might be able to infer a WOW sensibility.

Upwardly Mobile Home takes place in 1986 after Reagan's re-election. Three actors in a theatre company, who are preparing a production of a 1920s hit, *Shanghai Gesture*, are camping out under the Brooklyn Bridge, homeless. There, one woman peddles her old clothes, another sells instant coffee over the phone, and all three fantasize, argue and rehearse their show. A bizarre sense of humor combines with a barrage of intersecting ideas to create a complex criticism of American myths. Formally inventive, the piece follows a day in the life of these actresses, with overlapping monologs, songs and play-within-a-play sequences.



Lois Weaver (above), one of the Cafe's organizers, calls their approach "a feminist esthetic because its details are often forgotten or stepped over in male-dominated work."

Other WOW productions so far lack Split Britches' dramatic sophistication. But *Heart of the Scorpion*, "a lesbian Harlequin Romance" by Alice Forrester, also reflects some of WOW's typical energetic zaniness. Forrester's production also came out the Cafe's recent push to produce more in-house work. Another reason for this shift in emphasis is that the Cafe might lose its lease at 300 E. 11th when it comes up for renewal in March. "We wanted to be sure we would still have definition even if we lose the space," explains Weaver, "so we created a number of regular projects to fall under the umbrella of WOW Productions." In addition to Split Britches' and Forrester's work, these projects have included the Lower East Side Girls' Chorus, a loose collection of women who got together to sing; "Holl's Dolls," a group directed by Holly Hughes that is currently working on a new version of *Bye Bye Birdie*; "High Fiber Comedy," featuring the comic Reno; and the Working Girls Repertory, a newly-formed on-going women's repertory. Working Girls Repertory premiered in December with an adaptation of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*, adapted by Shaw and directed by Weaver. Incorporating story-telling techniques with dramatic representation, the play offers a subtly feminist revision of the fairy tale.

If the Cafe has not declared any manifestos to define the nature of WOW productions, some common themes and esthetics have emerged. Feminism and lesbianism appear in the shows not as issues but as givens. If there is an overriding artistic impulse, says Young, "it's simply to invent from what we have. We can't afford to go out and buy things, so our limits determine our creativity." What is true literally of the sets and costumes applies equally to the material of the plays—it is drawn from the women's lives. The stylistic result is an attention to detail, an approach Weaver calls "a feminine esthetic because its details are often forgotten or stepped over in male-dominated works. But little parts of our lives are as important as the big climactic events that usually make dramas." Often, for instance, they work from simple images or from examining a single day in a character's life. Their method of working also reflects a feminist intention with its implicit rejection of mainstream hierarchy; jobs are defined and individuals take responsibility for specific tasks, but every-

one contributes to creative processes in discussion, and anyone can become part of the Cafe staff simply by choice.

Working within limitations may be a fruitful challenge, Shaw is quick to point out, but she thinks they would do just as well with plenty of money and a big space. But chances are they won't ever have to worry about money cramping their creativity because they have slim prospects of ever acquiring much cash flow. Members of the WOW staff disagree about applying for grants. Some, like Troyano, believe that no one wants to bother sitting down to write proposals. Angelos likes the idea of grants, but found when she did some research that "the kinds of things I thought we might be able to get money for were not really the kinds of things we wanted to do." And Shaw worries that "grants change you. You get grants, people come in and *judge* you, and you start thinking that you better not do anything that will make them take your grant away." "Butch and femme night?" someone chimes in referring to a past extravaganza, "Forget it."

To compensate, WOW still throws benefits now and then; some of the best ones, the staff claims, have been rent parties. And some of them have been known to beg on the street, in Shaw's words, "guilt-tripping our friends into writing checks." It does not help that the Cafe has been robbed periodically. "Don't publish that we just bought a new projector," Angelos jokes. The life of Cafe property has averaged three or four months. They had speakers for only a month and have lost many bicycles. Shaw says, "They used to come here and even drink our beer, throw the cans on the floor, and leave the toilet seat up. But that stopped many months ago. Things feel safer."

The Cafe is even safer in a figurative sense. Anyone is encouraged to get up and perform at WOW and, says Weaver, "that encouragement creates a freedom to express oneself. Once a performer feels safe, you can train her." Troyano agrees and considers the support she gets from her WOW colleagues a crucial element of her progress. "People here will be critical of your work," she says, "but they'll criticize in a positive way that's helpful when you go out to perform in the other theatre world."

Though several of the WOW women refer to "the real theatre world," they do not really feel isolated or illegitimate. A number of WOW technicians and designers are hired by Equity productions, and the Cafe is known as a resource for good stage managers and technical people. But what gives WOW its strength is its independence: It needs no external sanctioning in order to survive because it has a loyal, critical audience of women of various backgrounds who consider the Cafe vital. "We do want criticism," Weaver points out. "We don't want to be ghettoized, but we also like the safe, growing atmosphere." "It's a place to learn the craft," says Troyano, "while you're doing it." Above all, Weaver continues, "the WOW Cafe is community theatre in the best sense—it's creating theatre of, for and by the community. If we have a big show to put on, we don't go outside to find a more talented actress, for instance, or a more talented and expensive lighting designer. We pull all the resources from the community as it continues to form itself." That's why WOW will survive even if they have to leave 330 E. 11th. WOW's community is defined by a force bigger than geography.

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