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Exit, Stage Lower East Side

The Closing of Surf Reality and the Theatorium Signals the End of a Theatrical Era

Trav S.D.

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From the late 1980s through the late '90s, New York's Poor Theater had its own Poverty Row, a crossroads in the heart of the Lower East Side that had more in common with grunge than Grotowski. At its peak circa 1999, one could count close to a dozen Off-Off-Broadway venues in the area bounded by Allen, Ridge, Houston, and Delancey streets. To a generation of NYC theater artists, this downscale neighborhood was home. While some may have been turned off by the filling-station-style rest rooms, the garbage under the seats, and the fire-sale sets and props, others were touched by the youthful enthusiasm that imbued the scene with a kind of magic. The houses that anchored it, run by bulldog impresarios with Ahab-like fanaticism, seemed indestructible, if only because the Grim Reaper wouldn't tarnish his scythe on them. Now, with the January loss of the Present Company Theatorium and the upcoming closure of Surf Reality, all but one of the strip's theaters will be history—victims of economics, burnout, and changing times. In 1988, the 'hood was strictly an urban frontier. The intersection of Stanton and Ludlow streets was a good place to score dope or purchase the services of a prostitute. Apart from these errands, no one—including the area's mostly Latino residents—dawdled there. Yet, implausibly, that year two of the area's storefronts were converted into theaters. The Independent Theatre Company, a splinter group from the Jean Cocteau Rep, opened the House of Candles on Stanton Street (near the present Arlene's Grocery). Like its mother company, the group was devoted to productions of "modern classics," works by Chekhov, Pinter, Beckett, and the like.



Meanwhile, around the corner on 167 Ludlow Street, a graduate of Ringling Brothers Clown College and his two LeCoq teachers from Carnegie Mellon were launching a more ambitious project. Initially called Theatre Club Funambules, the new space would soon be renamed *Todo con Nada* (often

shortened to *Nada*), becoming the epicenter for the groundswell that was to come. According to artistic director Aaron Beall (partners Tim and Babs Carryer were soon to drop out) the project began—ironically—as the twinkle in the eye of real estate developers Joe Cross and Woody Fox. "They thought it would increase the value of their property to have a theater on the block," says Beall. "It took a few years, but they were proved right." While Beall directed and produced many of his own productions in the space over the years (including well-publicized *Faust* and *Hamlet* festivals), *Nada's*

real business was space rental. The statistics were impressive: 2400 different productions in 12 years, including performances by such future household names as John Leguizamo, Reno, and Blue Man Group.

Five years later, House of Candles and Nada were joined by a third space. "When we first opened in 1993," says Surf Reality founder Robert Prichard, "there was a brothel in our basement and the space now occupied by the Bluestockings Bookstore was a crack deli. The building also featured a pawn shop. It's like we were a downtown mall for outlaws. Theoretically, one could boost some goods, redeem them for cash at the pawnshop, cop a little blow at the deli, grab a 'date' from the basement, and then come upstairs to see a show."

Prichard and his wife Jen had met as bit players on the set of *The Toxic Avenger*. Prichard had been shooting improvised videos with the likes of Todd Alcott and Matt Mitler, a process he called "surfing reality." When he formed his new video studio in an Allen Street loft, the phrase became both the brand name and an exhortation to its performers: "Surf Reality." Although legit theater was occasionally produced there, it was mostly a forum for variety shows presenting alternative stand-up and sketch comedy, such as the long-running "Faceboyz Open Mike Night" and "The Witching Hour," hosted by the whip-cracking s&m MC Mistress Elsa, played by Jen Prichard.

Nineteen ninety-five saw the formation of Collective Unconscious in a storefront at 145 Ludlow. This theater filled a niche somewhere between the experimental theater aspirations of Nada and the punk show business of Surf. Reverend Jen's *Anti-Slam*, starring the elf-eared, Budweiser-guzzling humorist, has played there every Wednesday since the theater's inception, but the theater has also launched such downtown hits as *Charlie Victor Romeo*, created by Collective members Patrick Daniels, Irving Gregory, and Bob Berger.

Seeds were sown for critical mass on the L.E.S. with the success of the First International New York Fringe Festival in 1997, co-produced by Nada, the Present Company, and Jonathon Harris. The Present Company, formerly based in a fourth-story walk-up on 45th Street, sought a downtown venue to serve as the center of subsequent festivals. They found one in an old auto-body shop on Stanton Street, a few blocks from Nada and Collective. Next to these 30- to 50-seat theatrettes, the Present Company Theatorium seemed a behemoth, with 20-foot ceilings, convenient catwalks above the playing space, a lobby, a bar, and a stage big enough that the cast didn't look like it was playing Twister. (The Theatorium also featured the occasional onstage rat appearance.)

Not to be outdone, the other L.E.S. managers began their own expansions. Beall picked up another Ludlow Street venue, the much beloved Piano Store (a former piano store), which was to house Nada's administrative office and featured an interesting loft in the playing space, allowing for two-tiered staging in a theater smaller than most people's apartments. The modesty of the venue was deceptive. Among the hits it fostered were *Fun Box 2000* and *The Donkey Show*. One block away on Orchard Street, the Prichards (with partners) opened Baby Jupiter, a restaurant and nightclub where they presented many of the Surf Reality acts.

Then in 1998, Beall began to expand . . . and expand . . . and expand. In September of that year, he made his new home base in the Present Company's old 45th Street digs, calling it Nada 45. The management of the downtown spaces was left to his two lieutenants Art Wallace and Ian Hill. By this time, the constellation included the original Nada (now called "Nada Classic"), the Piano Store, and

the House of Candles. To these were added the back room at the Pink Pony coffeehouse across the street from Nada, where Beall also produced, and the basement at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, which he corralled into the '98 Fringe Festival. Beall clearly relished the mantle of "empire builder"—even if it was an empire of back rooms, storefronts, and basements. In 1999, tired of sharing the spotlight with the Present Company, he decided to break away from the NYC Fringe franchise and start his own summer festival, which he called "Pure Pop." Despite major press coverage of the "fringe wars," the move proved to be a debacle. Underfunded, undervenued, and understaffed, Beall's "Pop" fizzled and 11 years' worth of street cred went with it. He had overreached himself and disappointed scores of young theater artists.

After Pure Pop, Beall was rarely seen around Ludlow Street. He moved from Nada 45 to a grand new venture, "Nada Show World," located in the former Times Square strip club. According to Ian Hill, this was the development that rang the curtain on his downtown empire. "Piano Store and Nada Classic were both meeting their own expenses," claims Hill, "but Aaron kept siphoning off the income to support Nada Show World." Beall claims the opposite was the case, that Show World was supporting Nada. Owing several months in back rent, both the Piano Store and Nada Classic closed their doors in 2000. (House of Candles was shut in 1998 due to fire-code violations).

Beall, who has raised self-mythologizing to an art form, has his own explanation for why Nada Classic tanked. "When the last heroin dealer on the block was arrested," he contends, "that was the week they doubled my rent." All the more reason, one would think, for restricting himself to one theater, and making it pay for itself. But whatever Beall's shortcomings as a manager, he is second to none as a visionary, and when the Nada theaters folded, the heart and soul went out of the neighborhood.

Long-term observers of the area watched it transform into a mini-Soho during the boom years of the fin de siècle. Upscale boutiques, tony bars, and nightclubs sprouted like kudzu.

In 2000, Baby Jupiter folded, the victim of Mayor Giuliani's enforcement of the cabaret law, which forbade dancing in establishments without a license. A Surf splinter group called Space headed by *Grindhouse-a-Go-Go* producer Tom Tenney suffered similar woes after running afoul of numerous city ordinances, shutting in six months. Robert Prichard's original club Surf Reality will fold in April of this year, another victim of skyrocketing rents. Clearly this is not the time to be starting a theater on the Lower East Side.


The Theatorium closed for good in January. Producing artistic director Elena K. Holy cites burnout as the principle for abandoning the space. "It's not as though the landlord is doubling the rent next month," she says. "It's been too high the whole time." The company will continue to mount work, but will not maintain its own space, which Holy says was a major drain on time and resources. Their new administrative offices are in ART/NY's "Spaces at 520," located in the garment district.

This facility, where scores of Off-Off companies—virtually a Who's Who of Alternative Theater—make their headquarters, represents a geographic shift. The new "downtown" seems to be midtown. Beall has moved back to 445 45th Street, into a space he now calls Todo 45. Show World (under new management) continues to present theater above the peep show. Anita Durst has her Chashama chain of storefronts on 42nd Street. Oddly, the "fringe" is now in the heart of the theater district.

Back in the old neighborhood, the Piano Store is now a bar called Pianos, and Baby Jupiter has become the French restaurant Cafe Charbon. House of Candles is part of an expanded Arlene's Grocery. Nada Classic has been swallowed up by the Ludlow Bar next door. Surf Reality will become a residential loft (which it always technically was), and Holy speculates that the Theatorium will be razed for an apartment building. In neighboring areas one can still find Big Cheap Theater. In the East Village, one can catch shows at the Horse Trade trifecta: the Kraine, the Red Room, and the St. Marks Theater. But on Ludlow Street, the sole holdout is Collective Unconscious.

"Our lease is up in a year and a half," says Collective co-director Gilad Rosner. "But we're hopeful that by that time the real estate boom will flatten out." Such hopes are the origin and the sustenance of such quixotic ventures as shoestring theaters in the first place.

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