The Birth of Off Broadway: Crash Course Theater #47

Crash Course: Theater
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hey there I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today we're going all the way from Broadway to Off Broadway which Yorick remidns me is actually not that far from Broadway. Are those Map Quest directions?

Why are we going to Off Broadway at all? Look, mid-centruy Broadway is great. It has incisive social dramas and dancing girls, though not usually in the same show. But in the middle of the 20th Century, Broadway only had thirty-some theaters, which was not nearly enough for producers to take a chance on all that avant-garde goodness. So today, we will look at the history of Off Broadway, and the genres, styles, and troupes that it supported including the Black Arts Movement. Lights up! Unless lights are too normal for your weird show.

Off Broadway theater had actually been around for a long time before anyone started calling it that. It's the natural continuatuion of the Little Theater movement that we explored in our episodes on American Moderns and the Harlem Renaissance. In New York, that meant theaters like the Province Town Players, the Washington Square Players, the Neighborhood Playhouse, and the Krigwa Players. After World War II, new theaters and companies appeared, and this movement became known as Off Broadway. If you want to get technical, Off Broadway used to refer to theaters outside of the Broadway Box, a stretch that ran from 40th to 54th streets in Manhattan, and that leaves a lot of city. Originally, most Off Broadway theaters were located in Greenwich Village, often in the same spaces that the little theaters had occupied. Eventually, Off Broadway became an Actors Equity designation concerning theater size, referring to theaters in Manhattan that have between one hundred and four hundred and ninety-nine seats. But Off Broadway is also a mindset. It's against shallow, big budget entertainment and in favor of ensemble driven, non-commercial work.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

Of course, plenty of off-Broadway stuff ends up transferring to Broadway and turns out to be very commerical. So...

I mean, you might be surprised to know that this bit about theater is complicated. In the early days, a lot of off-Broadway theaters were interested in producing the European avant-garde because America was apparently not absurdist enough on its own! But off-Broadway theaters also helped to develop a new American avant-garde, and were supportive of works by queer writers and writers of color.

Let's look at a few significant theaters and troupes: The Living Theater, Jose Quintero's Circle in the Square, and Joe Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival and Public Theater. The Living Theater was founded in 1947 by Judith and Julian Beck. They started out producing Brecht and Cocteau and Pirandello. But in the late 1950s, they began producing new American works, like Jack Gelber's "The Connection," an immersive play about drug addicts, and Kenneth H. Brown's "The Brig," a brutal play about a military prison.

The Living Theater then relocated to Europe. This was partly because of an unfortunate tax thing; anarchists do not like to pay taxes! The company reinvented themselves as a devised theater company, meaning a company that creates its own original works through rehearsal and exploration. Artaud was a big influence. The Living Theater created a bunch of pretty shocking, occasionally nude, and very participatory pieces like "Paradise Now" and "Mysteries and Smaller Pieces" and brought them back to New York.

These shows are basically where all of our clichés about experimental theater come from: long hair, loincloths, naked screaming, naked rolling around on the floor, naked screaming and rolling around on the floor with long hair... But try to remember these weren't clichés when the Living Theater did them.

The Circle in the Square Theater was founded in Greenwich Village in 1951 by Jose Quintero, the son of Panamanian parents. It was sort of a theater-in-disguise, because it was originally housed in a former nightclub and licensed as a cabaret space. This meant that the actors, a bunch of whom lived on site, also had to serve drinks.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

Circle in the Square made some gestures toward the European avant-garde, but under Quintero's passionate direction, it's best known for cementing the legacy of Tennessee Williams and rehabilitating the work of Eugene O'Neill, who had fallen way out of favor. The consummate Circle in the Square work is probably Quintero's 1956 revival of O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh," which had pretty much flopped the first time around. It starred Navy veteran, almost EGOT, and awesome actor Jason Robards, who at the time was still driving taxis.

The New York Times wrote that since Circle in the Square had originally been a nightclub, it was the perfect place to house O'Neill's waterfront dive. "It seems not like something written, but like something that is happening," wrote the critic. Take that, Broadway! Circle in the Square became known for an intense acting style, introducing audiences to influential actors like Geraldine Page, Colleen Dewhurst, and George C. Scott. The theater moved to the South Village in 1960. And then in 1972, it moved--surprise!--to Broadway.

Joe Papp was born in Brooklyn to Yiddish-speaking parents. After a stint in the Navy and some time out in California with former members of the Group Theater, he returned to New York and began to stage free Shakespreare plays in a Lower East Side church, insisting that Shakespeare could and should be for everyone. In 1956, the Parks Department gave him permission to use the East River Amphitheater. Robert Moses, then the parks commissioner, told him that he would have to charge admission fees, but Papp refused--Shakespeare should be free for all. The courts supported him. A permanent theater was built for him in Central Park. It opened in 1962, and free Shakespeare is still performed there every summer. Show up early; it gets crowded quick.

In 1966, Papp moved into what had been the Astor Library on Lafayette Street and transformed it into the Public Theater, which you can visit today. It's adjacent to another music, theatre, and nightclub venue called... Joe's Pub.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Some of the Public Theater's hits include "Hair," "A Chorus Line," "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf," "The Normal Heart," and yes, "Hamilton," which rumor has it is VERY good...

Papp's legacy is really important. He insisted on staging the classics with diverse casts. He championed wueer writers and writers of colors. And he demanded that the theater could and should be available to everyone. "Theater," he said, "is a social force. Noy just entertainment." Off-Broadway also helped foster the Black Arts Movement, the cultural wing of the Black Power Movement.

The Black Arts Movement has its roots far from Broadway, ostly with the Free Southern Theater, which toured plays like "Waiting

for Godot" around the Deep South. But the Black Arts Movement was specifically about encouraging African-American artists and suggesting that their work was part of a traition separate from the cultural work of white artists. The movement allied itself with postcolonial independence movements in Africa and around the world.

One of the movement's leader was the poet and playwright Amiri Baraka, who began his career as LeRoi Jones. His 1965 poem, "Black Art," written after the assassination of Malcolm X, became a manifesto for the movement. In one section, he wrote: "We want a black poem. And a black world. Let the world be a black poem and let all black people speak this poem, silently or loud."

Baraka's most famous play is probably "Dutchman," which opened at Off-Broadway's Cherry Lane Theater in 1964. It's set on a subway car, where Lula, a white woman, meets Clay, a black man. Lula mocks Clay and tempts him, finally goading him into admitting the anger he feels toward white people, even though he says he would never act on that anger. Lula then stabs Clay, and with the help of the other passengers, she throws his dead body out of the car. She then waits for the next black man.

The most important playwright to emerge from the Black ARts Movement and one of the greatest living American playwrights is Adrienne Kennedy.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Let's take a look at her breakthrough play, "Funnyhouse of a Negro," which opened Off-Broadway in 1964 at the East End Theater. Funnyhouse is another word for a carnival funhouse or a madhouse, and the play explores the devastating effects of racism on a young woman. It filters the style of the European avant-garde through the spirit of the Black Arts Movement.

Help us out, ThoughtBubble: "Funnyhouse of a Negro" is set in the bedroom of a young African-American woman named Sarah. But it's also immediately clear that we're inside Sarah's mind. The daughter of a dark-skinned father and a light-skinned mother, Sarah doesn't feel that she belongs anywhere. Sheis refracted into separate selves by race. You can feel this even in the stage directions: "in the middle of the stage in a strong white light, while the rst of the stage is in unnatural blackness."

The action is often interrupted by a harsh, frightening knocking at the door, the sound of Sarah's father trying to come in. After a prologue in which a woman in a white nightgown crosses the stage carrying a bald head in her arms, the play begins with a conversation between Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg about whiteness. The woman in the nightgown interrupts: she is Sarah's mother, distraught. She says she should never have let a black man touch her.

The scene shifts to Sarah's landlady who tells us that Sarah's father killed himelf when Patrice Lumumba, the Congolese independence leader, was assassinated, and that Sarah hasn't left her room since. Also, Sarah's hair is falling out. Sarah says that the landlady is wrong. She killed her father, clubbing him with a black skull. But we later learn that he may have actually left the family and married a white woman.

The Duchess has a conversation with a character named Raymond, the proprietor of the funnyhouse. They talk about how Sarah's mother is in an asylum, how her hair has all fallen out, and how Sarah is the product of rape. Patrice Lumumba gives a speech, and then the Duchess talks with Jesus.

The scene changes to a jungle, and the characters reappear, haloed and screaming. The scene returns to Sarah's room, and Sarah is discovered hanged. Thanks, ThoughtBubble.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

That was upsetting. And hallucinatory. But it's supposed to be upsetting and hallucinatory. The play is about one woman wrestling with identity in a racialized world, but it is also about how black artists and intellectuals fight to find their own voices in a world in which almost all of the models and precedents are white.

Adrienne Kennedy's voice is distinct. Her precise, surreal style is built on personal anguish and experience, and is deeply concerned with what it means to be a woman of color in a white world. Her work also expands the boundaries of what theatre can do and finds a new stage language for stories previously unseen in the American theatre. And she is still writing today, and is widely revered as a mentor figure by young African American playwrights.

Conclusion: By the 1960s, there was a problem. Off-Broadway had gotten... fancy. Work had become increasingly commercial, and costs were higher. That's how we got Off-Off-Broadway. Like Off-Broadway, this was mor or less a spontaneous movement. It kicked off in four Downtown spaces: Caffe Cino, Theater Genesis, Judson Poets Theater, and La MaMa.

Caffe Cino, run by Jose Cino, was literally a coffeehouse, but it gave playwrights, especially queer playwrights, a space to try out their work.
The judson Poets Theater was run by Al Carmines, an assistant minister, out of the Judson Memorial Church. It became a space for the art world and happenings and experimental dance.
Theater Genesis was housed in another church, St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, which was later the home of Rchard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater. Run by Ralph Cook, Theater Genesis encouraged poets and playwrights to improvise with their actors.
La MaMa was founded by Ellen Stewart, a former swimsuit designer, in 1961. Exuberant and welcoming, she supported many New York artists and later provided residencies to several European companies. La MaMa is still going today.
Funnily enough, I've worked on shows at all three of these places! And also I sat next to Lou Reed at La MaMa once!

===== (12:00) to (12:48) =====

Thanks for watching. Next time, Yorick and I will be poor and downtrodden--more so than usual--when we explore Poor Theater and the Theater of the Oppressed. Until then... wait, can we even afford a curtain? Okay... budget curtain.

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