

A black and white photograph of a city street, likely in the East Village. The image shows multi-story buildings with fire escapes, a traffic light, and utility poles. The scene is captured from a low angle, looking up the street. The title 'More fire!' is overlaid in a large, orange, serif font at the top.

More fire!

ROBIN EPSTEIN AND DOROTHY
CANTWELL AND THE LESBIAN
FEMINIST THEATRE SCENE IN THE
EAST VILLAGE IN THE 80s AND 90s

BY LISA SLOAN

IN THE 1980s and 1990s, lesbian feminist theater and performance thrived in New York City's East Village. New York City's WOW Café, which began in 1980 as an international women's theater festival before becoming a collective in 1982, emerged as a hotbed of lesbian theater. Lesbian performance luminaries such as Split Britches, a troupe comprised of two of WOW's founders, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, along with Deb Margolin; Carmelita Tropicana; Holly Hughes; and The Five Lesbian Brothers all counted themselves members of the WOW collective at one time. The WOW Café and its alumnae tend to dominate lesbian feminist theater criticism; comparatively little is known about other women's theater groups that were making lesbian work during this period in New York, such as More Fire! Productions. *New York Times* reporter Jennifer Dunning identifies More Fire! as one of "[New York City's] leading women's theater groups" alongside Split Britches and Women's Experimental Theater (C22). More Fire! Productions created pieces that challenged New York's changing artistic and economic landscapes from a lesbian perspective. More Fire! was co-founded in 1980 by visual artist Robin Epstein and actress Dorothy Cantwell. Friends since college, Epstein and Cantwell worked together waiting tables in Brooklyn and Manhattan. Their waitressing experiences provided fodder for their first play, *As the Burger Broils*. The piece premiered in October of 1980 at P.S. 122, and was the first full-length performance to be staged at the experimental East

Village venue. The group subsequently staged most of its works at University of the Streets, an organization that advocates and provides space for little-known artists, but also appeared at the 1981 Women's One World Festival, from which the WOW Café issued, and the Performing Garage, a lower Manhattan hub for experimental work. Cantwell co-wrote the collective's next two plays, *The Exorcism of Cheryl*, which considered women's feelings of self-defeat, and *Junk Love*, an exploration of hetero- and homosexual obsessions with romantic love, before leaving the group to pursue other performance opportunities. After Cantwell's departure, Epstein began to collaborate with lesbian activist, journalist, and novelist Sarah Schulman. Schulman and Epstein worked on plays together until the mid-1980s, when personal differences came between the collaborators. Epstein would create one last piece under the More Fire! name in 1987: a reflection on the trajectory of More Fire!, *Beyond Bedlam* staged the dissolution of a women's theater collective.

With Schulman working with Epstein on scripts, More Fire! Productions began making work that commented more overtly on social conditions. Two of the works that Schulman and Epstein co-wrote and performed in, *Art Failures* and *Epstein on the Beach*, problematize the gentrification of New York's East Village. In the satiric *Art Failures*, Epstein and Schulman play two lesbian stand-up comics—quotations of themselves named Robin and Sarah—struggling to make it New

York's trendy downtown art scene. Sarah lives in Tompkins Square Park because she has been displaced by gentrification. Gentrification similarly threatens Robin's waitressing job at an Eastern European restaurant: a real estate agent expresses interest in buying the restaurant and turning it into a gay men's sushi bar. She explains, "We love finding these rundown ethnic neighborhoods and bringing in some upward mobility. Already the community is proliferating with co-ops, croissant shops and shoe boutiques. Now take those projects over on Avenue D. They would make ideal luxury co-ops. People will pay anything for a river view" (Epstein and Schulman, *Art Failures* 16). The critique of East Village gentrification continues in *Epstein on the Beach*. Rising rents have pushed Robin out of the East Village to Brighton Beach. She says, "When the sushi bars came [to the East Village], I ignored them. When the straight people came, I turned the other cheek. When the galleries came, I shed a tear. And when they opened Steve's Ice Cream on Second Avenue, I moved to Brooklyn" (Epstein and Schulman, *Epstein* 13-14). Unlike the character Robin, the real Epstein and Schulman were not so passive: in addition to problematizing gentrification in their plays, they participated in marches and rallies against gentrification.

Even as Schulman and Epstein railed against the gentrification of the East Village, both onstage and off, that very issue would bring about the end of More Fire! Productions. By the late 1980s, with rents increasing for both housing and rehearsal/

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performance space in the East Village, Epstein could no longer afford to make work independently, and More Fire! disbanded. Over the nine years that More Fire! staged plays, Epstein funded the group's projects on tips from her waitressing jobs. Epstein practiced a feminine economy, stretching a limited budget a long way. Epstein's economy is evident in the production designs of *Art Failures*

and *Epstein on the Beach*: the shows employ hand-painted backdrops and handmade props crafted by Epstein. Epstein rented rehearsal and performance space at University of the Streets for \$15 a night, and ticket prices for More Fire! shows ranged from \$5 to \$8. Notably, Epstein was even able to pay the actors, who were a mix of amateurs and professionals, from her waitress earnings. Epstein's

economy is remarkable in comparison to her male contemporaries: the cost of Brooklyn Academy of Music's 1984 revival of Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach*, the abstract opera that Epstein on the Beach is titled after, totalled \$1 million, with tickets costing up to \$45 (Rockwell C13).

In addition to opposing gentrification, More Fire! also commented on lesbian invisibility in the burgeoning arts scene. As Epstein recalls, "The art world was not a woman's world, and my work with Sarah Schulman focused on that fact" (Epstein and Cantwell 12). In *Art Failures*, Robin and Sarah shop around their play, a lesbian take-off on Harvey Fierstein's Tony-award-winning play *Torch Song Trilogy*, to downtown theaters that foster new work, including *La MaMa* and *The Public*. The work is well-received, but the artistic associates are uninterested in producing a lesbian play. One artistic associate declares, "I love your work and I'd love to change it. Don't you have any European gay men in your group?" (Epstein and Schulman, *Art Failures* 26). The next says, "Listen girls, I love your work, but we just need to make a few changes. First, we'll turn the gay women into gay men." (Epstein and Schulman, *Art Failures* 28). Sure enough, work written and/or directed by men dominated these theaters' offerings in the early 1980s, and work by gay men, like Fierstein's *Torch Song Trilogy*, garnered critical acclaim.

Epstein and Schulman extended the opportunity for critique to their audiences: during the first run of the production in December of 1983, Robin appeals to the audience to ask

Erika Munk, critic and editor at the Village Voice, to review *Art Failures*. During the play's second run in April of 1984, Robin campaigns for an Obie award, a prize given by the Voice that honors Off-Broadway theater and performance. Sarah even distributed stamped postcards addressed to Munk to the spectators. Robin's appeals are an extension of the play's satire of the East Village art scene rather than a sincere plea for critical attention, for *Art Failures* characterizes trendy downtown performance as vacuous and apolitical. In the play, a successful performance artist friend advises Sarah and Robin that they "should have sixty people running in doing pedestrian movements. Use NYU students, they will do anything. And you've got to have music and video. Right now it's too cerebral, it's too idea-oriented.... The point is to...be entertaining, get an attractive package. Slides, video collabortions, special effects, glossy paper" (Epstein and Schulman, *Art Failures* 34). Here, Epstein and Schulman poke fun at fads in early '80s performance art, characterizing it as superficial.

The same performance artist refers to Robin and Sarah as "prisoners of the lesbo-ghetto" (Epstein and Schulman, *Art Failures* 33) a joke that recurs in *Epstein on the Beach*. If Epstein and Schulman were indeed prisoners of the lesbo ghetto, they were happy to be lifers. While the *Voice* was ambivalent about *Art Failures*, the play garnered glowing reviews in LGBT publications such as the *New York Native* and the *Gay Community News*, the feminist *Womanews*, and local magazine the *East Village Eye*. *Art Failures* spectators

were also enthusiastic: many used the *Art Failures* postcards to echo the play's insistence that more attention be paid to lesbian work. One woman, identifying herself as "a sister," wrote, "It's time lesbian artists got a break. Enough of Harvey Fierstein and those screaming queens—give some honest dykes a break!" (Postcards np). Another woman wrote, "Dear Erika, You really should come to see *Art Failures*!... Support work by [women] and lesbians" (Postcards np). One spectator urged, "Give them a chance! Girls should get something" (Postcards np). Another audience member wrote, "Liked it, silly, good—let's see more lesbians in shows not written, directed, etc. by men" (Postcards np). While *More Fire*'s work was not highly regarded in theater circles, the group was a vital part of the East Village's lesbian subculture in the 1980s, creating lesbian representation that East Village lesbians were clearly eager for.

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performance as an alternative archive of the history of feminism in the United States. Last summer, Lisa traveled to New York to conduct archival research towards her dissertation at the Barnard Center for Research on Women as well as the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center. Though Lisa's academic pursuits focus on historical lesbian performance, Lisa also appreciates contemporary lesbian performance. An avid theater-goer, she has been known to drive six hours to see a lesbian play.

Photo credit: page 12, East Village/Lower East Side Historic District, "East Village/Lower East Side Historic District Designation Report," Wikimedia Commons

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