

BROADWAY'S BARROOM REVIVAL

FOR MORE THAN TWELVE YEARS, THE WEST BANK CAFE (407 West 42nd Street) was an exemplary theater district saloon where famous, hopeful, and has-been theatricals by the score drank devotedly. Tennessee Williams was an early café regular notorious for his nasty bar scraps. Sean Penn and Madonna often exited the West Bank separately, late nights during the eighties, using front and rear doors to divert paparazzi. Katharine Hepburn, Burt Reynolds, Albert Finney, and Warren Beatty all hung out on occasion.

And then there was the night that a struggling actor-regular named Bruce Willis flopped down at the West Bank bar moaning about agents and his own inability, specifically, to find one. Very shortly after this beer-sobbing demonstration, as a direct result of intervention by the industry-savvy West Bank barflies, an agent from Triad Artists signed Willis and sent him to Hollywood to audition for *Moonlighting*.

So the West Bank's inexplicably abrupt closing in August 1991 affected the theatrical community with much the same force as the shuttering of a long-running, much-beloved Broadway hit. That's

why it's gratifying to report—to actors and nonactors alike—that the lights are on once again at the West Bank. And especially gratifying to find the café's grinning, bullet-headed original manager/owner, Steve Olsen, back in charge. It is Olsen who first conceived the West Bank Cafe, back in 1978, and who opened and rode shotgun over it for all of the café's vivid life, before being forced to depart the premises more than two years ago under mysterious and highly suspicious circumstances, so far as regulars could tell.

The obvious question—what is Olsen doing lurking about once again?—brings an unlikely answer.

"The actors brought me back," Olsen says. "I know, it's amazing," he maintains, reflexively wiping down a table as he speaks, "but the actors did it." "Did what?" someone wonders. Olsen just smiles.

ON ONE LEVEL, IT ALL CAME DOWN TO THE SHOWS IN THE basement," he explains. Yes, the shows: The West Bank basement had long offered actors something more than the upper floor's convivial alcoholic camaraderie—namely, a handsome performance space available to all comers, at a suicidally slim profit margin. Olsen—very sensitive to the plight of actors since his own teenage bartending days ministering to gangs of them at an uncle's tavern on the Upper West Side—had opened up the West Bank's basement in 1979 as a fully outfitted theatrical cabaret.

Over the years, the West Bank Cabaret played host to a stupendous, sometimes stupefying array of talent in new plays

and musicals. At least two of these productions actually managed to transfer out of the West Bank basement: a musical called *The News*, which reached Broadway for a brief run in 1985, and *Standup Shakespeare*, a musical Shakespearean revue that Mike Nichols had moved to an Off Broadway house in 1987, with similarly short-lived success.

"The cabaret always came close to paying for itself," Olsen insists now, rising to pace the silent West Bank space, "and all improvements, upstairs and down, were made out of receipts, so my two financial partners never had to kick anything back in. Then, everything seemed to get old all at once; after twelve years of business, every corner of the restaurant suddenly wore down. So I went to my partners to tell them that we needed cash for some major repairs, and they just fired me. Flat. 'Go around the corner and tend bar someplace,' they said, which I did. I went to work bartending at the Film Center Cafe over on Ninth Avenue.

"First thing they did was cancel the theater program," Olsen adds grimly. "Then they replaced me with a guy from their

construction company. Within a few weeks, business apparently dropped off something like 70 percent. The actors did it. They just stopped coming in; the place basically went dead—the deep freeze. I was tossed out on July 17, 1990, and my former partners finally closed down one year later. That's when I made them an offer, and, well, here I am."

Was Olsen really saying that a bunch of actors had both killed and saved the West Bank Cafe?

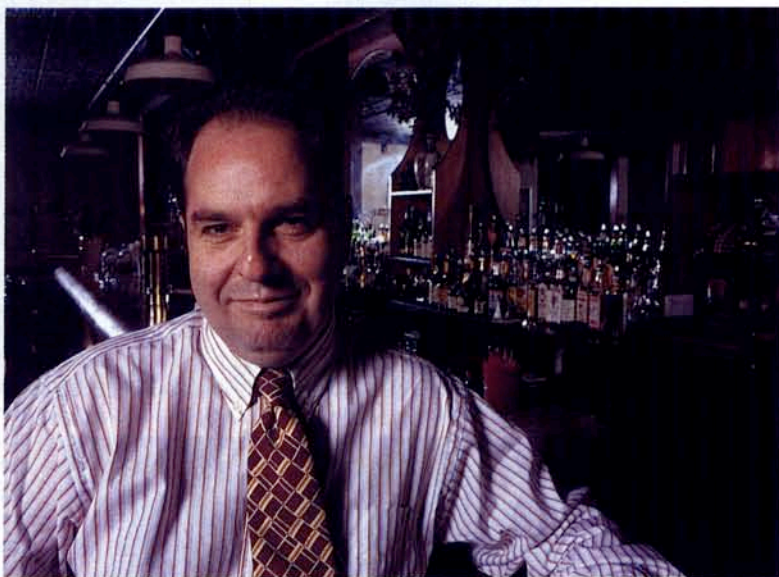
He laughs. "Hell, my new partners are actors: John Heard and Mark

Linn Baker. Baker wants to start his own theater company downstairs. Heard says he's just thrilled to be part of the place. We've renovated the kitchen completely, and the basement; I've got a whole list of plays ready to go in." Broadway set designer Robin Wagner worked on the theater and the dining room; the grand reopening is scheduled for early September.

Olsen's listeners still couldn't quite get over this. In a decade of declining Broadway-theater attendance, diminished local film production, and devastating N.E.A. cuts, a bunch of New York actors had gone out and saved their favorite bar? On their own? Happy ending?

"Let me tell you something," Olsen says quietly. "We reopened here unofficially for one night with a party for all the old regulars, and from 8 P.M. until four o'clock in the morning, more than 500 people came through that door. You know what every last one of them said to me? Every damn one of them who shook my hand or grabbed me that night? 'Welcome back,' they said. 'We haven't been in here in a year and a half. It's nice to be home.'"

BARRY SINGER



"The actors did it": Steve Olsen at the rebuilt West Bank Cafe.