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THEATER

THEATER; At Joe's Pub, a Hip Club, Velvet Rope, Cigarette Smoke

By BARRY SINGER

PICTURE Adolph Green. Sprightly, white-haired musical-theater octogenarian. Screenwriter, with his partner, Betty Comden, for "Sing in' in the Rain"; lyricist, with Ms. Comden, for "Wonderful Town," "Bells Are Ringing" and "On the Town." Picture them both. Ms. Comden is the elegant woman in black.

Hold on to this image.

Alongside it, imagine the rappers Q Tip, Sean (Puffy) Combs and Positive K just sitting around, after hours, off duty.

Now put the two crews together.

Welcome to Joe's Pub, open seven nights a week.

You enter through the side door of the Joseph Papp Public Theater. Farther south on Lafayette Street, revolving doors admit patrons to the Public's various theatrical spaces, but here, on the outskirts, an iron-fenced portal offers entree to the theater's new nightclub.

Coaxing nightclubs from legitimate theaters is not unheard of. Florenz Ziegfeld found room for one in 1915 atop his New Amsterdam Theater on West 42d Street. Throughout the life span of Ziegfeld's "Follies," the New Amsterdam roof was the toniest nightspot in New York.

But Joe's Pub is a much less lofty enterprise, carved as it is from ground-floor back-office space at the theater. The \$2.35 million club is the result, in part, of a construction and renovation grant to the Public from city capital funds that includes refurbishment of the Delacorte Theater in Central Park.

There were some doubters when the club opened in October who wondered whether the Public Theater could make a theater-night life alliance work. Six months later, according to George C. Wolfe, the producer of the Public, Joe's Pub "is actually doing better than I thought it would."

"It has caught fire," Mr. Wolfe said. "Though it still isn't making any money, but that will come, like any new business."

The question now is, what effect if any will the popular success of Joe's Pub have on the creation of theater at the Public. For Mr. Wolfe, the answer is twofold. "It's an entirely new talent pool for us that we're going to tap," he said, "and, hopefully, an entirely new audience, too."

The club's programming is idiosyncratic: from ethnic music ensembles to spoken-word artists to the most promising young musical-theater composers and performers on the contemporary scene, the changing roster has generated an after-hours theatricality all its own.

Starting on Tuesday, a monthlong Performance Festival will supplement the usual (or, more to the point, unusual) entertainment. A showcase for offbeat solo artists and downtown theater companies, the festival will include Slant, an Asian-American performance trio and rock band; Morplay, a Boston-based white hip-hop duo; Dream Express, an existential lounge act, written and, in part, performed by the playwright and director Len Jenkins, plus a bill of short plays by members of New Georges, an Obie-winning women's theater company. One-woman shows by Nancy Giles, a Second City alumna, and Sarah Jones, a spoken-word performer, are also on the schedule.

Insinuating cutting-edge culture into mainstream theater and cabaret fare is a revolutionary act of sorts. And perhaps Mr. Wolfe is right: young audiences who may never have bought a theater ticket will be enticed into doing so by what they see at Joe's Pub. Who could imagine Comden and Green and Funk Master Flex, show-music fans and supermodels, Audra McDonald and Donald Trump occupying common ground? Yet on many nights, from the opening at 5 P.M. to the closing around 4 A.M., you can watch it happen.

"I'm perpetually looking for ways to get all kinds of people into this theater," said Mr. Wolfe, above the din one recent night. "Give them a stake in the building, a sense of ownership. Then, once we get them in, start to blur the boundaries."

The man responsible for the Pub's trendy late-night profile is Serge Becker, the designer behind some of the most popular club ventures of the last decade or so, including Bowery Bar, M.K., Area and Fez. The Public -- which leases the space to Mr. Becker, who operates the club -- gets a small percentage of the food and drink sales, while keeping the admission fees from all events it programs.

AFTER midnight, though, it is Mr. Becker, for the most part, who books the noisier techno music entertainment and ornaments the room with celebrities. Like Giorgio Armani. There he was, one Friday night, listening to the drum and bass boogie of Future Proof, an Indian hip-hop ensemble, whose youthful Asian-American audience chain-smoked avidly in the aisles.

In designing Joe's Pub, Mr. Becker has given the rectangular room a wide-open feel: the small platform stage can be seen from all angles. Yet the two-tiered space -- with its bar area slightly raised and overlooking the main room -- also appears cozy, especially when its 160 seats are filled. A brace of ringside tables arcs around the modest stage. Table tops are mirrored; coffee is served in Japanese teapots, and food ranges from deviled eggs to caviar platters. There is a two-drink minimum and admission fees range from \$10 to \$30.

Massive pinups of the Pub's flamboyant namesake, Joseph Papp, the founder of the Shakespeare Festival, cover one wall and, near the stage, a spotlighted accordion is displayed on high, behind glass. Could it once have been Mr. Papp's?

"Yes," suggested Mr. Wolfe sardonically. "Joe used to play it while making casting decisions."

Mr. Becker knows otherwise. "It's not Joe's at all," he said with a smile when asked. "It's not anybody's. I just liked the way it looked."

The cabaret crowd arrives early on Mondays for the 8:30 P.M. Songbook Series; the curator is the associate producer at the Public, Wiley Hausam. To date, audiences have listened to young composers like Jason Robert Brown, who wrote the music for the show "Parade," and performers like the three-time Tony Award-winner Ms. McDonald, who unofficially christened Joe's Pub with a series of concerts in October.

Appearing throughout this month is Lea DeLaria, the Mermanesque singer and Sapphoesque comic who found stardom in the Public's revival of "On the Town" and who is closing out her Off Broadway run in Paul Rudnick's comedy "The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told."

Tuesday fare includes the spoken word, alternative music and fringe performance acts, slam poets, flavor-of-the-month singer-songwriters like Duncan Sheik and polemical authors like the poet and novelist Sapphire.

Wednesdays bring salsa late into the night. Though dancing is forbidden, at least formally (Joe's Pub does not have a cabaret license), salsa crowds do shimmy. Thursdays through Sundays are more loosely programmed.

One night, as eager Duncan Sheik fans took their seats, Bonnie Metzgar, the producer of Joe's Pub who programs the Public's events there, said, "If we hook them right away, I think we might actually turn them into theatergoers."

Hours later, in a room now filling with cigarette smoke and predatory social energy, Ms. Metzgar mused aloud, "Even if we get 2 out of 200 every night, that's a vast potential new audience for the theater."

Joe's Pub may well be the only nightclub in the country that operates as a covert recruiting center for the theater. But the gulf between the Public Theater agenda and that of Mr. Becker can sometimes yawn ominously.

Reservations are required for Public Theater-sponsored performances in the early evening, with tickets available at the theater's box office and through Telecharge. A velvet rope and moody door minions rule after midnight, and Public Theater patrons and subscribers have sometimes been turned away.

Yet this odd co-existence also lends the enterprise a real frisson. And the potential for creative cross-pollination between nightclub and theater remains vast. Slant, Ms. Metzgar said, has received a

commission from the Public to create a new piece for one of the theaters across the hall.

"We've become the theater that never closes," concluded Mr. Wolfe, from his banquet. "We never let our audience go."

Photos: The composer Jason Robert Brown (William Lopez for The New York Times) performing at Joe's Pub, the six-month-old cabaret at the Joseph Papp Public Theater. (Michael Sofronski for The New York Times); George C. Wolfe (bottom), the producer of the Public, is hoping that a new generation of theatergoers will emerge from the club's young patrons. (James Hamilton for The New York Times) Lea DeLaria appears at the club this month. (Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times)(pg. 7); Audra McDonald performing at Joe's Pub last October. (Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times) (pg. 24)