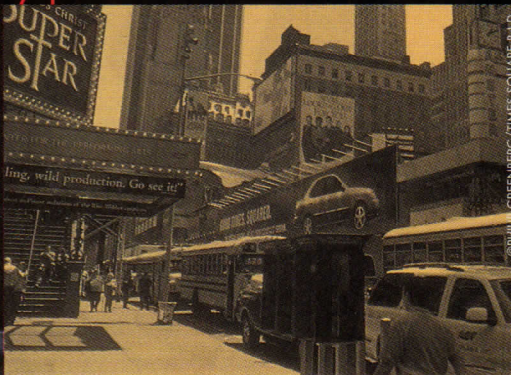


# New York's Many Theater

From Broadway pizzazz to Lower East Side tenement agitprop, New York



Just ask any pavement pounder: The drama and vitality of Manhattan is best experienced on foot. Although theaterlovers generally take their drama sitting down, they know that exploring theater districts during the daytime can be just as interesting as going there at night. The **Broadway Open House** tour (Tuesdays through Saturday mornings, departing from Times Square Visitor's Center, [888] BROADWAY) provides a great opportunity to take the pulse of Times Square, the teeming center of the city, and feed a theater habit at the same time. The walking tour of New York's Theater District offers history, gossip, and architectural pointers as well as the unique opportunity to experience two Broadway houses before the audience gets in.

## Walking Broadway

At the **Martin Beck Theater** on West 45th Street, the current tenant is the Tony-winning revival of *Kiss Me, Kate*. The theater is an exquisitely decorated 12th-century Italian Romanesque fantasy. The stage is lit by a single naked bulb fixed on a metal stand — the “ghost light.” According to theater legend, the light is kept burning either to keep ghosts away or to keep them happy when the theater is empty. More practically, it's an Actors Equity-mandated insurance against people tripping on the set once the stage lights are off.

Our guide recounts highlights from the Martin Beck's past: Elizabeth Taylor made her Broadway debut in a revival of *The Little Foxes* here. Up close by the stage we

observe the stickers placed on the floor to mark positions for the actors and set elements. Peeking into the orchestra pit, covered with net to protect the musicians from flying props or perhaps falling actors, we glimpse a strewn copy of yesterday's *New York Post* and empty coffee cups. To one side at the back of the auditorium stands the computerized soundboard. The show's sound technician has added a personal touch to the workspace with family photos and a small stuffed teddy bear.

Outside, we walk through the streets on which the bulk of the 38 theaters currently designated as Broadway houses are located. Over at Eighth Avenue and 47th Street the run-to-seed **Biltmore Theater** (once home of *Hair*) is being renovated to become the future home of the Manhattan Theater Club. Under New



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## WHAT'S ON BROADWAY THIS FALL

Let those who scored tickets to *The Producers* brag, there are still plenty of theater choices for visitors to New York this year. Here's what's planned at press time:

- Strindberg's *Dance of Death*, with Ian McKellen and Helen Mirren
- *Thou Shalt Not*, with music and lyrics by Harry Connick, Jr., directed by Susan Stroman
- Clare Booth Luce's *The Women*, with Kristan Johnson, Rue McClanahan, Cynthia Nixon, Amy Ryan, Jennifer Tilly, and Mary Louise Wilson
- Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins*
- *Elaine Stritch: At Liberty*, opening in October at The Public Theater
- Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*
- *Mamma Mia!*, the ABBA musical
- *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, from La Jolla Playouse
- Neil Simon's *45 Seconds from Broadway*
- Michael Frayn's *Noises Off*
- *Ionesco Festival*: 39 plays at over a dozen theaters throughout Manhattan, September-December

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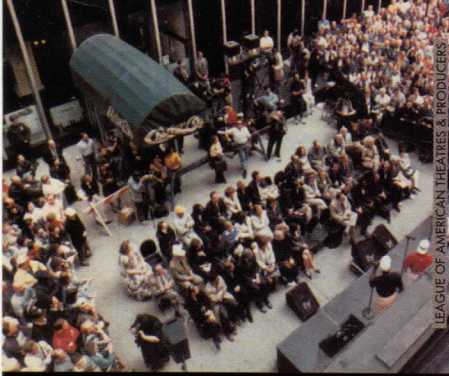
# Districts

theaterlovers have seen it all



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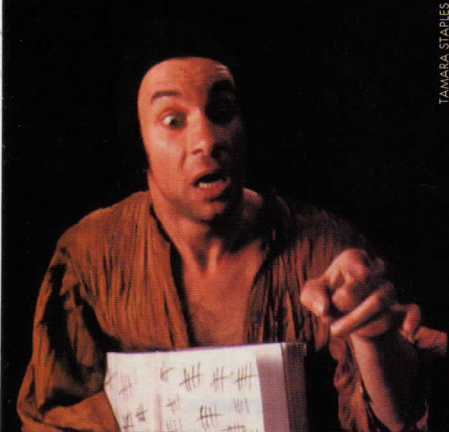




LEAGUE OF AMERICAN THEATRES & PRODUCERS



CHRIS ELYNN



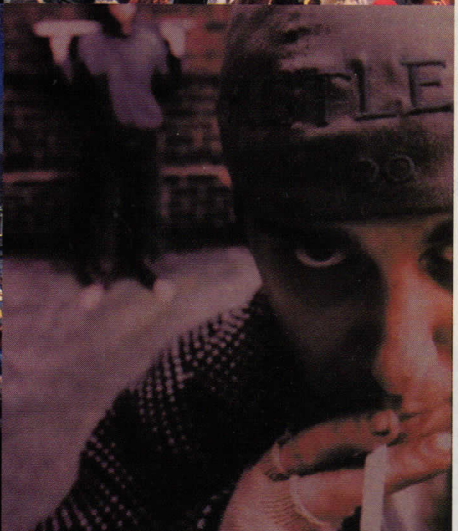
TAMARA STABLES



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RON B. WILSON



JULIE PIERCE



JOAN MARCUS

York City's real estate zoning regulations, the edifice will incorporate an office tower that utilizes the "air rights" of the landmarked old theater.

It is now almost midday, and the usual Saturday pedestrian traffic is streaming through sidewalks of Times Square. Tour groups jostle against each other to avoid stepping on the portrait artists and the sidewalk vendors hawking sketches and photos of the neighborhood. A line of ticket buyers has begun to snake around **Duffy Square**, the triangle at 47th Street where the orange and white TKTS booth offers discounted (25–50%) tickets for the day's matinee and evening performances.

Walking on West 47th Street, our guide points out the tiny alley in which Brando practiced boxing with a friend during the historic premiere engagement of *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the adjoining **Barrymore Theater**. After conducting us through the "Street of Hits," the block on 45th Street bounded by Eighth Avenue and Broadway, which houses six of the most desirable Broadway venues, our tour terminates at **Shubert Alley**. Actors once thronged this spot outside the offices of the powerful Shubert brothers in the hopes of getting cast in shows. The pedestrian walkway which links 44th and 45th Streets now serves as a kind of town square for the Broadway community — a venue for the annual Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS fundraiser, Broadway Flea Market, and the end of the season celebration, Stars in the Alley. People may complain that its golden age has passed, but Broadway still retains its glamour for both insiders and visitors.

### East Village Theater Scene

There are plenty of options for those who crave an alternative experience. One of them is just a ten-minute subway ride from Times Square. Seven stops on the F line and we are far away from the bright lights of the Great White Way and in the midst of a very different theater district located in the **East Village**. On just a single block (between 2nd and 3rd Avenues) on **East Fourth Street** we find a cluster of vibrant theaters that represents both the past and the future of New York avant-garde theater. **La Mama E.T.C.** (Experimental Theater Company) opened its doors here in 1962, a pioneer of the Off-Off-Broadway movement that challenged the Off-Broadway movement, which had developed in the previous decade to provide an alternative to the commercial Broadway establishment.

*Clockwise from top left: Shubert Alley, host to "Stars in the Alley," the spring celebration of new and long-running Broadway productions; Debbie Does Dallas at the NYC Fringe Festival; Times Square; Hustle at the Fringe Festival; the discount ticket booth, TKTS, at Duffy Square; Rites of Spring at the Fringe Festival; Times Square; and An Apology for the Course and Outcome of Certain Events Delivered by Dr. John Faustus on this his Final Evening at the NYC Fringe Festival.*



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At the Lyric: *Otello* (Ben Heppner & Renée Fleming) • *Street Scene* (Catherine Malfitano & Dean Peterson); at Chicago Symphony *Tristan und Isolde* in concert (Christian Franz & Waltraud Meier) • Excerpts from *Götterdämmerung* (Elizabeth Connell)

**Wexford Festival in Ireland**  
October 17 to 28, 2001

Dublin, Wexford, Killarney  
*The Jacobin* (Dvořák) • *Allessandro Stradella* (von Flotow) • *Sappho* (Massenet)

**Last Chance at La Scala**  
October 24 to November 8, 2001

Milan, Cernobbio, Parma, Bologna, Verona, Florence & Venice  
*Macbeth* • *Luisa Miller* • *Attila* • *Tancredi*  
*The Marriage of Figaro* • *Brahms' German Requiem* • *Private Recital - Giuseppe Verdi*  
Corale di Parma.

**Operatic Splendor in Berlin & Dresden**  
November 9 to 19, 2001

*Parsifal* • *Otello* • *Verdi Requiem* • *Chamber Concert*  
*Ballet* • *La Clemenza di Tito* • *Die Walküre*

**Christmas Cheer in Prague, Salzburg & Vienna**  
December 13 to 26, 2001

*Rigoletto* • *Rusalka* • *Czech Mass*  
*Two Mozart Concerts* • *The Marriage of Figaro*  
*Elektra* • *Romeo and Juliet* • *The Nutcracker*  
*La Sonnambula*

**New Year's Eve Gala at the Metropolitan Opera**

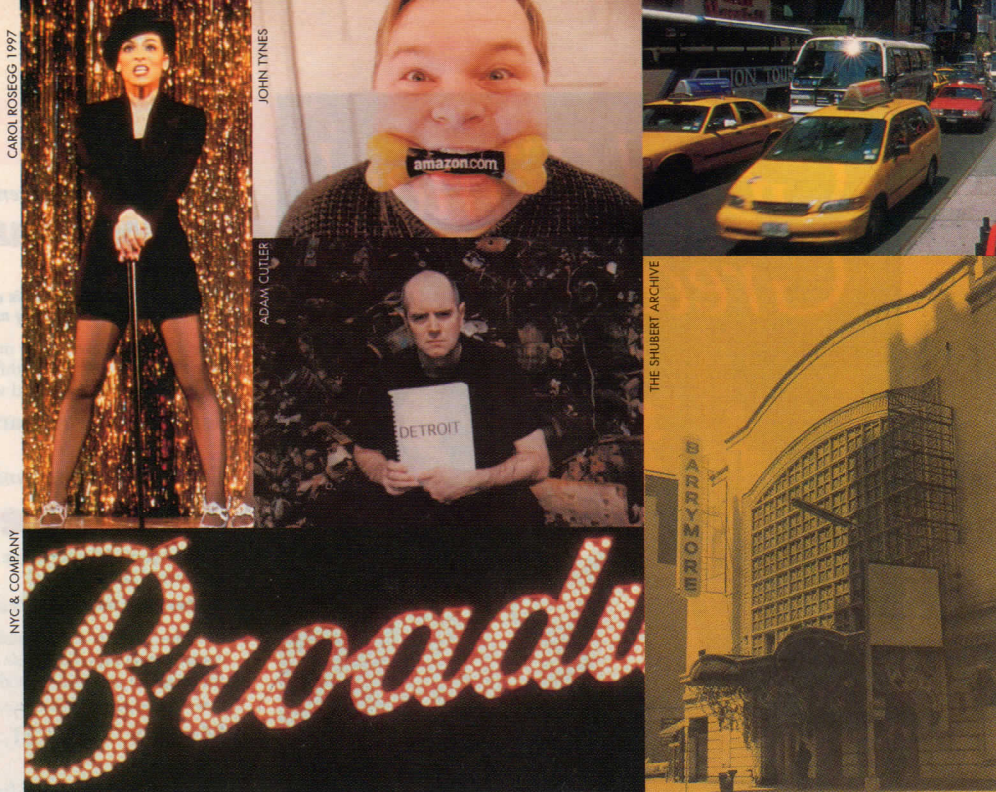
December 27, 2001 to January 2, 2002  
*La Bohème* with surprise guest artists on New Year's Eve • *Don Carlo* (Gorchakova, Borodina, Margison, Hvorostovsky, Ramey)  
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Clockwise from top left: Jasmine Guy in Chicago; *21 Dog Years: Doing Time @ Amazon.com* at the NYC Fringe Festival; traffic on Broadway; *Seven Against Thebes* at La MaMa E.T.C.; The Ethel Barrymore Theatre on West 47th Street; and *Teaching Detroit* at the NYC Fringe Festival.

The New York Theater Workshop (the home of *Rent*) is one of the city's more innovative Off-Broadway resident companies. **WOW** (Women's One World) Cafe, a women-only collective, has been active since 1980. The new kids on the block — the Kraine, Red Room, Rod Rogers Studio, Paradise, and Duo theaters draw in the next generation of theater artists and audiences and play host to **New York International Fringe Festival** in August, which showcases the work of emerging artists from around the world.

**Lower East Side Trendy**

But let's keep moving East — to the area roughly below East Houston Street, east of the Bowery and up to the East River. Now shrunk from its original East 14th Street boundaries, the **Lower East Side** (Lower East Side Visitors' Center, 261 Broome Street, [212] 226-9010, [www.lowereastside.com](http://www.lowereastside.com)) historically provided a home for innumerable boatloads of immigrants from Europe in the late 1800s, and by the turn of the last century had become the world's largest Jewish settlement. Seedy as well as trendy, this neighborhood is in constant flux. Bohemians, cutting edge artists, and fashionistas have established beachheads amid the local population, now mostly Puerto Rican or Asian. Memories of a vanished era are preserved

at the **Lower East Side Tenement Museum** (90 Orchard St, [212] 431-0233, [www.tenement.org](http://www.tenement.org)) on Orchard Street and the **Eldridge Street Synagogue**.

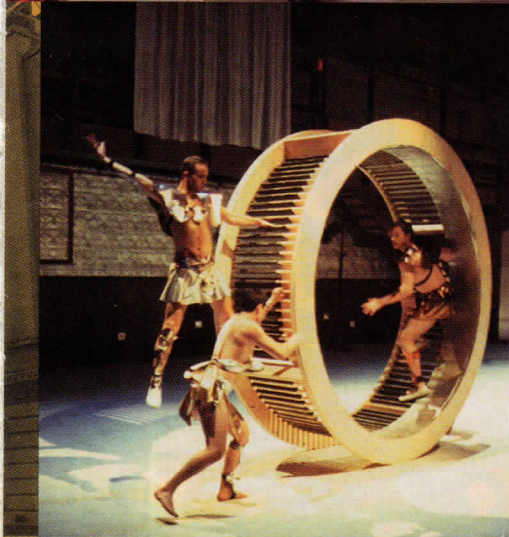
On Sundays, bargain hunters flock to the open market on Orchard Street, where Eastern European Jewish immigrants once peddled goods out of pushcarts right up to the mid 1930s. There are no bargains, however, at the chic boutiques that stand cheek by jowl with the local discount stores, laundromats, and bodegas on this street and on adjoining Ludlow. At **Cherry** (185 Orchard), for instance, a used vintage raincoat could set you back \$2,000. However, at **TG 170** (170 Ludlow Street) you might pick up the creation of a new designer on the verge of making a splash in SoHo or Madison Avenue. At 94 Rivington Street, **Toys in Babeland**, a sex toy store run for and by women, proudly flies its flag. The neighborhood transforms itself in the evening when the nightclubs and bars come alive, and celebrities drop in at the small deceptively low-key bistro, **71 Clinton Fresh Food**.

The theater companies of the Lower East Side are scrappier and financially more precarious than their East Village counterparts — a few of the pioneers that pushed Off-Off Broadway into this neighborhood have since been forced to shut down. Dominating the scene is the Fringe Festival producer **The Present Company**,





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JOHNATHAN SLAFF

at whose space on Stanton Street, the Theatorium, the unlikely current Broadway musical *Urinetown!* made its New York debut. At 145 Ludlow Street, a mysterious storefront window display leads into the eclectic world of **Collective Unconscious**, which is gaining national attention for its touring experimental production *Charlie Victor Romeo*.

Dilapidation, renewal, and transformation are visible everywhere. Schapiro's House of Kosher and Sacramental Wines, the city's last surviving winery has shut its doors on Rivington Street, but **Gus's Pickles** is still open on Essex Street, and **Katz's Deli** (at E. Houston and Ludlow) remains a neighborhood landmark. Walking on Norfolk Street towards the Lower East Side's northern boundary, you encounter a striking red building that perhaps captures the essence of this fascinating neighborhood. The 1850 neo-gothic structure is the first synagogue to be built by Jewish immigrants. (Prior to this, the various congregations had converted existing churches for worship.) The German Jews who built it moved uptown long ago and the building is now called the **Angel Orensanz Center**, after the sculptor who bought the building for a studio in 1986 (172 Norfolk Street, [212] 529-7194, [www.orensanz.org](http://www.orensanz.org)).

Step inside and discover a dramatically exciting space — a ceiling that is gloriously vaulted although its turquoise and gold paint is now faded, wooden floors, peeling walls, and multiple wooden balconies — lit in the daytime by sunlight streaming through arched windows. Currently undergoing restoration, the

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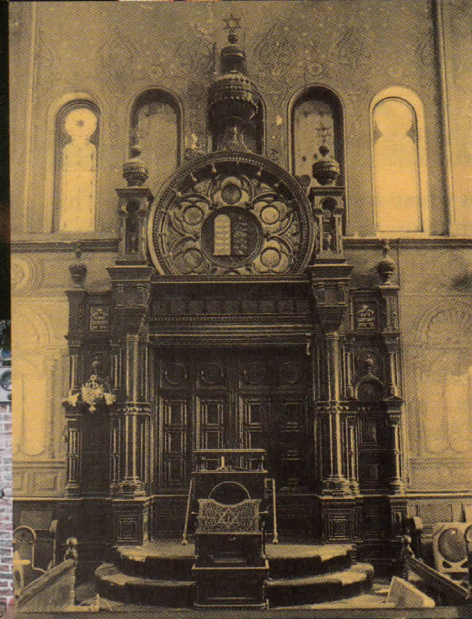
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Scenes and sites from the Lower East Side (clockwise from top left): Tenement apartment ca. 1916 at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum; *Charlie Victor Romeo* at Collective Unconscious; *Cleartcut, catastrophe!* at the Kraine; Eldridge Street Synagogue; Jewish heritage projects at Eldridge Street; New York City Fringe Festival founders John Clancy and Elena K. Holy; *Shoes at the Red Room*; and *Give Him A Minute* at The Present Company.

Angel Orensanz Center has hosted the filming of several music videos, the American debut of Alexander McQueen, the bad boy of British fashion, and Sarah Jessica Parker and Matthew Broderick's wedding. But a portion of the building is also functioning again as a synagogue. In

the spirit of the renewed Lower East Side, the Center is resurrecting its heritage and at the same time staying on top of New York fashion. □

*Gerard Raymond writes on theater and film and lives in New York City.*