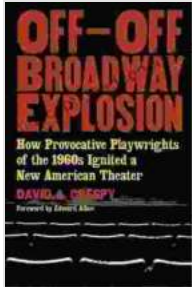


Critical History of the 1960s Off Off Broadway Movement Theater: A Transformative Force in American Performance Art

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The 1960s witnessed a cultural revolution that extended its reach to the realm of theater. The Off Off Broadway movement emerged as a vibrant counterculture to the established Broadway scene, challenging conventions and pushing boundaries in innovative ways. This article delves into the critical history of the Off Off Broadway movement theater, examining its origins, key figures, groundbreaking productions, and lasting impact on American theater.



Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement (Theater: Theory/Text/Performance) by Kris Deva North

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

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Origins and Influences:

The Off Off Broadway movement emerged in the early 1960s as a reaction to the commercialization and artistic limitations of Broadway. Young theater artists, seeking greater freedom of expression and experimentation, established small, independent theater companies and performance

spaces in the East Village, Greenwich Village, and other bohemian neighborhoods of New York City.

Off Off Broadway theater drew inspiration from various sources, including European avant-garde movements such as Dadaism and Surrealism, the Beat Generation's focus on individuality and nonconformity, and the social and political unrest of the 1960s.

Key Figures and Productions:

- **Joseph Chaikin and The Open Theater:** Chaikin's experimental company explored collective creation, non-linear narratives, and physicalized performance.
- **Richard Foreman and Ontological-Hysteric Theater:** Foreman's absurdist plays and fragmented structures challenged traditional notions of character, plot, and dialogue.
- **Andrei Serban and La MaMa Experimental Theater Club:** Serban's eclectic productions combined elements of Eastern European theater, avant-garde art, and ritual performance.
- **Sam Shepard and The Performance Group:** Shepard's minimalist plays and unconventional staging techniques explored themes of alienation, violence, and American mythology.
- **The Living Theatre:** Co-founded by Judith Malina and Julian Beck, this experimental company engaged in political activism and pushed the boundaries of theater as a social and political force.

Groundbreaking Productions:

Off Off Broadway theaters presented a wide range of groundbreaking productions that challenged theatrical norms and expanded the possibilities of performance art.

- **"The Brig" (1963) by Kenneth Brown:** A harrowing drama that exposed the brutality of military life.
- **"America Hurrah" (1966) by Jean-Claude van Itallie:** A series of short plays that satirized American society and explored themes of identity and conformity.
- **"El Grande de Coca-Cola" (1967) by Luis Valdez:** A revolutionary play that used Chicano culture and experimental techniques to address social and political issues.
- **"The Serpent" (1968) by Jean-Claude van Itallie:** An absurdist play that explored the nature of reality and the subconscious mind.
- **"The Tooth of Crime" (1972) by Sam Shepard:** A darkly humorous play that combined elements of rock music, myth, and surrealism.

Impact and Legacy:

The Off Off Broadway movement theater had a profound impact on American theater, both at the time and in the decades that followed. It:

- **Democratized theater** by making it accessible to a wider range of artists and audiences.
- **Stimulated innovation** by encouraging experimentation and challenging artistic boundaries.

- **Inspired a new generation of theater artists** by providing a platform for emerging talent.
- **Influenced mainstream theater** by introducing new ideas and techniques that eventually permeated into Broadway and beyond.
- **Continues to inspire contemporary theater artists** by providing a legacy of experimentation, risk-taking, and social engagement.

Critical Perspectives:

The Off Off Broadway movement theater has been the subject of extensive critical analysis and debate. Some critics have lauded its innovative spirit and democratizing effect on theater, while others have questioned its artistic merit and its potential for elitism.

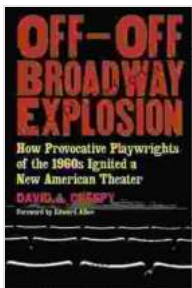
Some of the key critical perspectives on Off Off Broadway theater include:

- **Artistic Innovation and Experimentation:** Critics have praised Off Off Broadway for its role as a catalyst for experimentation and innovation in theater, pushing the boundaries of form, content, and performance.
- **Political and Social Engagement:** Off Off Broadway theater has been lauded for its willingness to tackle controversial political and social issues, providing a voice to marginalized communities and challenging the status quo.
- **Accessibility and Inclusivity:** Critics have argued that Off Off Broadway's non-commercial nature and low production costs made theater more accessible to a broader range of artists and audiences.

- **Quality and Artistic Merit:** Some critics have questioned the artistic merit of some Off Off Broadway productions, arguing that the emphasis on experimentation and innovation sometimes came at the expense of quality.
- **Elitism and Exclusivity:** Despite its democratic intentions, Off Off Broadway has been criticized for its potential for elitism and exclusivity, as it often catered to a small and privileged audience.

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The 1960s Off Off Broadway movement theater was a transformative force in American theater, challenging conventions, expanding the boundaries of performance art, and inspiring a new generation of theater artists. Its legacy continues to influence contemporary theater, providing a model for experimentation, risk-taking, and social engagement.



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