



Time Out New York

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THE NEW VICTORY®
THEATER

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A New 42nd Street project

WIN-WIN SITUATION

The New Victory redefined kids' theater —and 42nd Street triumphed

By **BARBARA ARIA**

Families have been so keen to empty their wallets along 42nd Street these days that it's easy to forget that nobody brought their kids there before December 1995. That's when The New Victory opened as the city's first year-round children's theater and became the first reclaimed porn house on the block. Indeed, The New Victory began life as a means to an end: to turn 42nd Street around.

"The area was deeply blighted," recalls former dancer and Joyce cofounder Cora Cahan, president of the nonprofit New 42nd Street Inc., which conceived, built and runs the theater. "The real-estate market had collapsed and the block was either shuttered or it was sex shops or slasher kung fu films. We had seven theaters to work with, two of which had to be nonprofit. We didn't have to operate them—we could have turned them over and collected the rent. But no one would come to 42nd Street, so we figured that we'd better do something to show that the block might work." Cahan and her New 42nd Street colleagues decided to invent something that people couldn't find anywhere else in the city. One of the ideas was totally unique—"a presentation house where kids could come and see a range of art forms in a theater that was not painted red, yellow and blue."

The promise of The Victory's opening persuaded Michael Eisner to take a risk with the New Amsterdam, which set the ball rolling for the Disneyfication of 42nd Street. Meanwhile, the fate of The New Victory itself was far from clear. Selling tickets as low as \$10 for performances by international touring companies like London's Young Vic demands enormous subsidies; early on, Cahan knew that one third of the theater's operating costs would have to come from rents paid by The New 42nd Street's commercial tenants, such as the Ford Center. But, she says, "When we went forward with the plan, these tenants weren't even a gleam in anybody's eye. Every time we moved forward, I would warn the board that there was no proof this would work; they said that the risk to 42nd Street of not going forward was much greater than the risk of going forward."

In five years, The New Victory has evolved from sacrificial lamb to one of the city's most respected cultural institutions for kids. Critics regularly review its productions. Its runs often sell out. And the theater is credited with having pioneered a new, sophisticated vision of children's entertainment. That vision has provided a context for other ambitious experiments, including two New York-based children's film festivals and kids' programming at such institutions as the Kitchen.

"The opening of The New Victory was tremendously important," says David Gonzalez, creator of *Sofrito!* and other hip family entertainments, and former host of WNYC's *New York Kids*. "It's not only the direct service that they give—bringing high-quality theater from around the world—but indirectly; they've set a standard that theater for young people has got to reach."

Unlike most kids' theaters—which, Cahan says, tend to offer either saccharin or zero-budget productions—The Victory often brings in edgy work originally made for adults. Presumably, this is because most work created for kids is of the "sweet and silly" or message-ridden type that Cahan deplors and that, she believes, kids don't like much, either. "They know when you're trying to pull a number on

them, and they adore when you're treating them as if they're intelligent and witty and sophisticated, because, actually, they are."

While Cahan nimbly skirts questions about the Gore-Lieberman clean-entertainment drive, she does point out that live theater is not like movies. "We did a work from the Young Vic," she says. "There were eyes picked out with all the gluck behind the eyeballs hanging out and there was a heel cut off and a toe cut off and blood and gore. Most of the kids loved it. They know at the end the actors are going to have their eyes and their toes and are going to take a curtain call. They know it's make-believe.

"As we begin to understand our audience, the range of possibilities broadens," Cahan continues. "We realize we can bring in works like *Shockheaded Peter*, a London fringe production that was not at all intended for kids. People were shocked that we brought that in. We were at 103-percent capacity. That kind of work really does cross over. Kids see it one way and adults see it another way, and ideally you go out after the show and talk about it."

And now there are places to go and talk about it right down the block. How does Cahan feel about today's 42nd Street? "I'm a little schizophrenic on the subject," she starts, and then shifts gear. "No. I believe it has succeeded in so many ways, in that the block has something for everybody." But she's unequivocal about The New Victory: "We didn't have to do this. Our lives could have been very simple. But how dull. How utterly dull."