

THEATER ROW

A STONE'S THROW OFF BROADWAY

• 42d STREET, BETWEEN 9th AND 10th AVENUES •

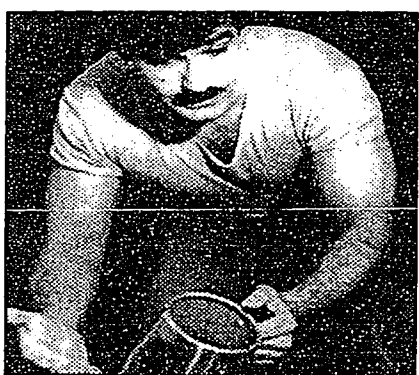
NEW YORK'S Growing Stage Scene



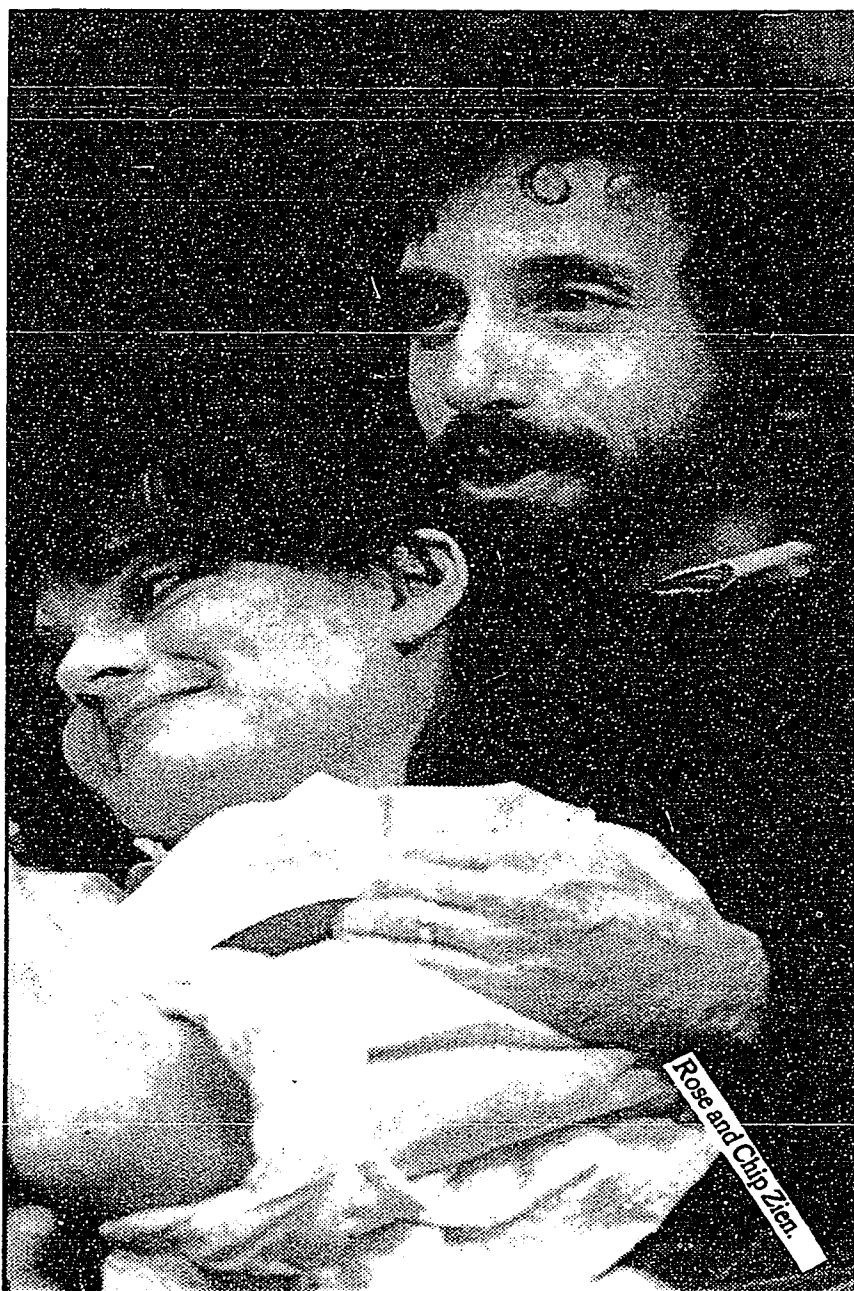
"Fable for Friends" Cynthia Darlow and Timothy Daly.



"Rockaby" Billie Whitelaw rehearsing.



"Mademoiselle" Nick Demetrius.



"Isn't It Romantic" Cristine Rose and Chip Zien.



"The Rivals" Angela Pietropinto.



"Sarita" Carmen Rosario and Sheila Dabney.



"Fool for Love" Will Patton.

Susan Cook (Fables), John Haynes (Rockaby), Arthur Whitney (Mademoiselle), Peter Cunningham (Isn't It Romantic), Cathryn Williams (Rivals), Carol Halebian (Sarita), Gerry Goldstein (Fool for Love).

A Choice of 9 Plays on the Boards

By SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN

"CHECK IT OUT!" the local entrepreneurs used to shout when the attractions on the 400 block of West 42d Street included massage parlors and burlesque shows. There is still plenty of reason to check out the block between Ninth and 10th Avenues, but the lures today are of a very different sort.

On what has been christened Theater Row, one can find nine plays this weekend, from a Restoration comedy to a socially conscious musical, from Wendy Wasser-

stein's look at the Zabar's crowd to Sam Shepard's meditations on the new West and two productions of Samuel Beckett. And although Playwrights Horizons began the rehabilitation of the block with its arrival almost a decade ago, Theater Row is still being discovered by up-town and suburban audiences.

"The most exciting thing," said Jack Garfein, artistic director of the Actors and Directors Theater, "was the night I saw five limousines out front of the Beckett plays. I said to myself, 'We finally got the carriage trade.'"

"The theaters are always lit," said Andre Bishop, artistic director

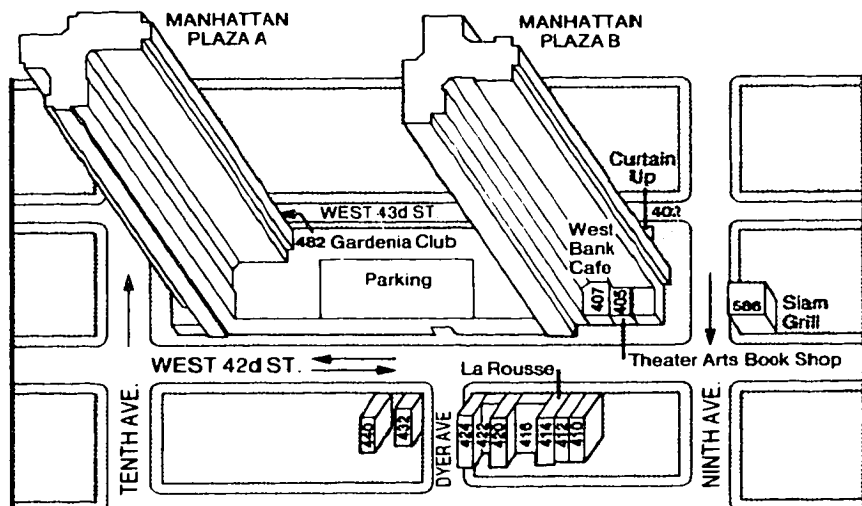
of Playwrights Horizons, "and there's a fair amount of crossover, of 'If I can't see this, I'll see that.' You go out at intermission, and there are seven or eight sets of audiences mingling. And that's a real vindication."

A kind of legend has grown up about Theater Row that depicts its success as the result of a conscious campaign, of an urban-affairs dissertation come to life. Much was planned, but the story, like so many in theater, begins with serendipity.

Bob Moss, the first artistic director of Playwrights Horizons, started the company in a Y.M.C.A. in the West 50's. The theater had to move out in 1974 and was on the verge of losing its state aid if Mr. Moss did not find a new theater soon. Desperate, he rented a dilapidated building on West 42d Street — a former theater that itself was a remnant of a failed attempt to bring Off Broadway to the block in the 1960's. "When we moved here," Mr. Bishop recalled, "urban revitalization was the last thing on anyone's mind. We wanted to do one season and get out. We weren't these far-reaching thinkers."

But one day late in the first Playwrights Horizons season on the block, Mr. Moss saw several men in suits pointing at the surrounding buildings — "and we didn't see many people on the block in suits those days," Mr. Bishop said. One of the men was Fred Papert, who was interested in some sort of redevelopment for the block. Partly through conversations with Mr. Moss, Mr. Papert struck on the idea of reviving the block by making it a home for nonprofit theaters, each putting on a season of plays.

Things did not work out exactly that way. One of the fledgling com-



Key to Theater Row

- 410 Samuel Beckett Theater; Manhattan Punch Line Theater
- 412 Actors and Directors Lab; Harold Clurman Theater
- 414 Ticket Central
- 416 Playwrights Horizon

- 420 Acting Company; Harlem Children's Theater Company; Intar; Neighborhood Group Theater
- 422 Lion Theater Company
- 424 South Street Theater
- 432 Douglas Fairbanks Theater; Raft Theater
- 440 Nat Horne Theater

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Theater Row's Stage Scene

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panies, the Black Theater Alliance, went bankrupt. Other companies began to rent their theaters for commercial productions more often than they put on their own shows. Thus, Theater Row today is a mixture of resident nonprofit companies, like Playwrights Horizons, Intar and the Manhattan Punch Line, and of commercial Off Broadway productions like the Beckett and Shepard plays.

What is indisputable, though, is that the block has made its name with its track record. Playwrights Horizons was the starting point for William Finn's "March of the Falsettos," Christopher Durang's "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All for You" and Ted Tally's "Coming Attractions," among other shows. Manhattan Punch Line won acclaim for its productions of Terrence McNally's "It's Only a Play" and George S. Kaufman's "Butter and Egg Man." Two of the current mainstays on Theater Row carry over from last season — Mr. Shepard's "Fool for

Love" and "Three Plays by Beckett."

Restaurants Move In

As theater developed, so did other attractions. Several restaurants have sprung up on or near Theater Row, and so has the Theater Arts Book Shop at 405 West 42d Street. The 1978 opening of Manhattan Plaza — a complex of subsidized apartments for artists — helped anchor the neighborhood, for it occupied an entire block bounded by 9th and 10th Avenues and by 42d and 43d Streets. What was once scruffy was now positively trendy.

No longer does Theater Row entertain solely the downtown devotees of Off and Off Off Broadway. The audiences now come from uptown, the outer boroughs and the suburbs. Playwrights Horizons, for instance, has found that 15 percent of its subscribers are from the East Side, 13 percent from New Jersey and Connecticut, and about 5 percent each from Brooklyn, Long Island and Westchester County.

"It's still a battle," Steve Kaplan, artistic director of Manhattan Punch Line, said "to get the people who

don't go west of Fifth Avenue. But as they said 150 years ago, there's nothing like a hit for what ails you."

Two or three hits is an even better tonic. "The other night," Mr. Garfein recalled, "I had a girl come in to buy a ticket for the Beckett plays. She asked what time it would let out because her boyfriend had seen them already, so while she was at Beckett, he went to see 'Isn't It Romantic.'"

Hottest Ticket on the Street

"Isn't It Romantic" at Playwrights Horizons is probably the hottest ticket now on Theater Row. Wendy Wasserstein's comedy about two New York women of about 30 and their relationships with their parents has enjoyed enthusiastic reviews. There are performances tonight at 8, tomorrow at 7 and 10 P.M., and Sunday at 3 and 7 P.M. Tickets are \$19. Playwrights Horizons is at 416 West 42d Street. Tickets: 279-4200.

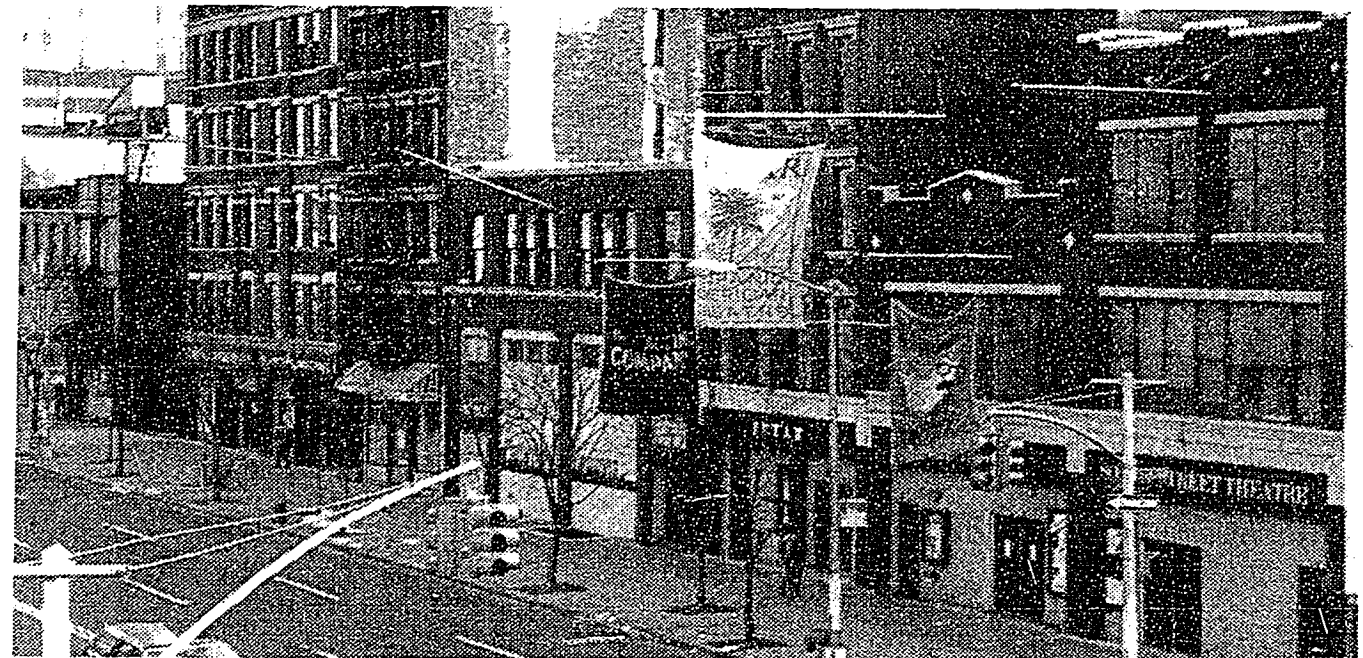
Meanwhile, upstairs at Playwrights Horizons, Mark O'Donnell's "Fables for Friends" has performances tonight at 8, tomorrow at 7 and 10 P.M., and Sunday at 3 and 7 P.M. The play is a series of sketches revolving around the theme of friendship. Tickets are \$12 to \$15.

The new Beckett show on the block. "Rockaby," featuring the British actress Billie Whitelaw, is in previews tonight at 8, tomorrow at 2:30 and 8 P.M. and Sunday at 3 and 7 P.M. Tickets are \$20 for tonight and tomorrow night, and \$18 for all other performances. "Rockaby" is playing in the Samuel Beckett Theater — formerly the Actors and Directors Theater — at 410 West 42d Street: Tickets: 594-2826.

"Three Plays by Beckett" — one about the relationship between a storyteller and a listener, the second a tribute to the dissident Czechoslovak playwright Vaclav Havel and the last a political drama of terror andquisition — have been running since June at the Harold Clurman Theater, 412 West 42d Street. There are performances tonight at 8, tomorrow at 2:30 and 8 P.M., and Sunday at 3 and 7 P.M. Tickets are \$16 to \$20 for tonight, tomorrow night and Sunday matinee; \$12 to \$16 for the Saturday matinee, and \$14 to \$18 for Sunday night; Tickets: 594-2370.

Two Prolific Authors

Two of the great names in Off Broadway theater also are represented on Theater Row this weekend. The Intar Theater, 420 West 42d Street, is staging "Sarita" by Maria Irene Fornes. Miss Fornes has written dozens of plays since 1960 and has won three Obie awards for directing and playwriting, as well as a special citation for contributions to Off Broadway theater. "Sarita" is a bit of a departure for her — a romantic musical about a woman torn between



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Theater Row looking south on 42d Street, between Ninth and Dyer Avenues.

love for an evangelist and for an outcast. There are performances tonight at 8 and tomorrow and Sunday at 3 and 8 P.M. Tickets are \$10 to \$12. The number to order tickets is 279-4200.

An equally prolific and even more widely celebrated author is Sam Shepard, winner of a Pulitzer Prize. His "Fool for Love," the story of a stormy meeting between two long-time lovers, who may also be brother and sister, is at the Douglas Fairbanks Theater, 432 West 42d Street. There are performances tonight at 8, tomorrow at 7 and 10 P.M., and Sunday at 3 and 7 P.M. Tickets are \$20 for the Saturday matinee and \$22.50 for all other shows; Tickets: 239-4321.

Manhattan Punch Line is reviving Richard Brinsley Sheridan's "Rivals," a Restoration comedy, thick with confusion, mistaken identi-

ty, deception and duels. There are shows tonight at 8, tomorrow at 3 and 8 P.M., and Sunday at 3 P.M. in the Lion Theater, 422 West 42d Street. Tickets are \$8; telephone: 279-4200.

French Teacher and Circus

The South Street Theater, 424 West 42d Street, is presenting "Mademoiselle," Arthur Whitney's play about an aged, half-mad and fascinating French teacher, living in a single-room-occupancy hotel. There are performances tonight at 8 and tomorrow at 3 and 8 P.M., with tickets \$10; telephone: 279-4200.

"He Who Gets Slapped," Leonid Andreyev's tragicomedy about the backstage life of a French circus in the early 1900's, is playing at the Neighborhood Group Theater, on the second floor at 420 West 42d Street.

Tickets are \$6 tonight and tomorrow at 8 P.M.; telephone: 279-4200.

Although it is not officially part of Theater Row, the West Bank Cafe, 407 West 42d Street, enriches the area's theater scene with its cabaret. Tonight at 8:30 there is a performance of Lewis Black's comedy "Suburban Life," and at 10:30, Dan Deraey and Rusty Magee bring their "Prime Time Comedy and Music" to the stage. Tomorrow, "Suburban Life" is performed at 8:30 P.M.; Lewis Black does comedy and Gloria Woods sings jazz at 10:30 P.M., and at midnight the traditional "anything goes" cabaret commences. The cover charge is \$3 for each show tonight and for the 8:30 show tomorrow, and \$5 for the 10:30 show tomorrow. The midnight show is free; telephone: 695-6909.