

The Caffe Cino



The Caffe Cino

LOCATION

Borough of Manhattan
31 Cornelia Street

LANDMARK TYPE

Individual

SIGNIFICANCE

No. 31 Cornelia Street in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan is culturally significant for its association with the Caffe Cino, which occupied the building's ground floor commercial space from 1958 to 1968. During those ten years, the coffee shop served as an experimental theater venue, becoming the birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway and New York City's first gay theater.





Former location of the Caffe Cino, 31 Cornelia Street
2019

LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION

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The Caffe Cino

31 Cornelia Street, Manhattan

Designation List 513 LP-2635

Built: 1877

Builder: Benjamin Warner

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan, Tax Map Block 590, Lot 47 in part, consisting of the land beneath the building's footprint, as shown on the attached map.

Calendared: May 14, 2019

Public Hearing: June 4, 2019

On June 4, 2019, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation of the Caffe Cino as a New York City Landmark and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No.1). The hearing was duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of the law. Forty people testified in favor of the proposed designation of Caffe Cino, including representatives of Assemblymember Richard N. Gottfried, City Council Speaker Corey Johnson, and City Councilmember Daniel Dromm. Speaker Johnson's testimony was jointly signed by State Senator Brad Hoylman, Assemblymembers Deborah Glick and Daniel O'Donnell, and New York City Council Members Margaret Chin, Daniel Dromm, Carlos Menchaca, Debi Rose, Ritchie Torres, and Jimmy Van Bramer. Also speaking in favor of the designation were representatives of the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, the Historic Districts Council, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, the Society for the Architecture of the City, the Victorian Society of New York, the Real Estate Board of New York,

the National Parks Conservation Association, Village Preservation, Save Chelsea, and the Bowery Alliance of Neighbors, and 19 individuals. No one spoke in opposition to the proposed designation. The Commission also received 124 written submissions in favor of the proposed designation, including from Bronx Borough President Reuben Diaz, New York City Council Member Adrienne Adams, the Preservation League of New York State, and 121 individuals.

Summary

The Caffe Cino

The building at 31 Cornelia Street, situated between Bleecker and West 4th streets in Manhattan, is culturally significant for its association with the Caffe Cino, which occupied the building's commercial space from 1958 to 1968. The coffee shop served as a theater venue, becoming the birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway and New York City's first gay theater. The 4-story, brick, tenement and store building was constructed by Benjamin Warner in 1877 for Michael Maloney and has a stone foundation and Philadelphia brick walls, with cast iron and wood storefront elements. Designed in a modest Italianate style, the building is located within the city's Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II, which was designated in 2010.

Joe Cino, an Italian-American gay man, opened the Caffe Cino in 1958 as a coffee shop and art exhibition space. Soon, the cafe was also used for poetry readings and small, experimental theater productions. The Caffe Cino emerged as a venue for new and unknown playwrights, most of whom were gay men. At this time, portraying homosexuality in theatrical productions was illegal under the Wales Padlock Law of 1927 and the Caffe Cino became a center for gay artists to share their work. Many of these projects overtly depicted homosexual themes in a positive manner on stage for the first time. The venue established the Off-Off-Broadway scene, freed from the usual constraints of Broadway and Off-Broadway projects that were required to adhere to specific financial structures and more conventional narrative subjects. Performances at the Caffe Cino were produced on a tight budget and were unusually

cheap to attend: all that was required was a one dollar purchase at the cafe. As a result, the shows were available to a diverse audience.

Playwrights and performers who presented their work at the Caffe Cino pioneered the Off-Off-Broadway, experimental, and gay theater movements. Theater at the Cino consistently acknowledged the existence and experiences of gay people, without the prevailing homophobic stereotypes. While the Cino legitimized the value of experimental theater in its own right, many artists who started there also experienced success later with Off-Broadway or Broadway productions. Tom Eyan, who wrote the Broadway hit *Dreamgirls* in 1981 for which he won a Tony, John Guare, author of *Six Degrees of Separation*, Sam Shepard, actor and playwright who won a Pulitzer in 1979 for his play *Buried Child*, and Lanford Wilson, who wrote the Broadway hit *Fifth of July*, are a few of the many significant playwrights that got their start at the Caffe Cino. Other well-known names also became patrons of the venue, including playwright Edward Albee and artist Andy Warhol.

The Caffe Cino closed in 1968, the year after Joe Cino's tragic suicide. Even before the 1969 Stonewall riots, the cafe provided a safe and nurturing space for gay artists to congregate, stage their work, and openly portray narratives and themes significant to the gay community. The building retains a high degree of integrity to the period associated with the Caffe Cino.

Building Description

The Caffè Cino

Description¹

Cornelia Street (South) Facade

No. 31 Cornelia Street is a four-story, tenement-and-store building with a stone foundation and Philadelphia brick exterior walls, accented with cast iron and wood storefront elements. Three bays wide, the modest Italianate-style building has a projecting galvanized-iron cornice with a paneled frieze and scrolled, acanthus-leaf brackets, typical of its style. Flush stone lintels and simple, projecting stone sills define the windows on the second, third, and fourth stories. The metal fire escape on the front facade is likely historic.

A wood cornice with dentils and stylized, fluted end-brackets visually separates the first-story commercial space from the residential spaces above (second to fourth stories). Historic photos of the Caffè Cino show a row of 13 spotlights attached to the first-story cornice; currently, three spotlights remain at this location. The first story contains a side-bay entrance that accesses the upper stories and a commercial entrance flanked by windows. Located at the top of two concrete steps, the western side-bay entrance is slightly recessed, and has a cast-iron entrance surround marked with “Z.S. & A. Ayres Iron Foundry, 45 St. Cor. 10 Av. NY.” Framing a possibly historic wood-and-glass paneled door and a transom opening, the entrance surround is composed of paneled pilasters with bands featuring a projecting diamond pattern. The capital on the eastern pilaster is decorated with foliage and an egg-and-dart pattern.

East of the side-bay entrance is the storefront and the former location of the Caffè Cino.

Fenestration flanks a recessed central commercial entrance, with a wider window to the west and a narrower window to the east.

The upper stories of 31 Cornelia Street remain intact and the exterior of the storefront retains the overall form from the mid-20th century when it was occupied by the Caffè Cino, including the side bay entrance flanked by iron pilasters, the configuration of the recessed storefront entrance and fenestration, and the wood cornice with end brackets above the first story. Much of the storefront is now clad with vertical board wood paneling.

Alterations present at time of association with the Caffè Cino

Transom above window on eastern end of first story replaced with air conditioning unit by 1965 (now covered); transom above commercial entrance replaced with air conditioning unit by 1965 (now covered);² 13 spotlights at first-story cornice.

Later Alterations³

First-story storefront clad with vertical board wood paneling (c. 1985-2009); replacement windows throughout; historic single-pane windows with transoms that flanked the first-story commercial entrance (present during the period of the Caffè Cino) replaced with wood casement windows (c. 1985-2009); transom level on first story enclosed for HVAC system; historic paired wood-and-glass commercial entrance doors with transom replaced with single wood-and-glass door (pre-2009); transom above commercial entrance covered (pre-2009);⁴ historic cast iron pilasters that flanked the bay east of central commercial entrance (present during the Caffè Cino period) replaced or covered c. 1985-2009;⁵ round light fixtures flanking commercial entrance (added 2018-2019); replacement western side-bay transom on first story; decorative elements such as the capital on western pilaster missing from western side-bay entrance surround; light fixtures

(added c. 1985-2009) and doorbell panel at side-bay entrance; awning below first story cornice (added 2018-2019) with three spotlights below the awning; stylized end-bracket on eastern side of first-story cornice altered (pre-2009); hanging sign at second story; bird deterrent wire above crown and molding below frieze; utility box, metal sign, mailbox at storefront.

West Facade

The building's west facade is partially visible and consists of brick laid in common bond, a rooftop bulkhead, and two recessed bays with window openings.

Alterations

Brick infill at fourth-story window.

History and Significance

The Caffè Cino

Discrimination and Activism in the Gay Community⁶

Gay themes, subtexts, and supporting characters were present in early-20th century American theater but were primarily defined by the prevailing homophobic stereotypes of the time, with homosexuals depicted as outrageously effeminate or depraved. When gay playwrights depicted gay characters in their work, they were often forced to employ euphemisms, veiling characters within accepted heterosexual norms.⁷ As playwrights and audiences began to increasingly embrace progressive ideals in the post-World War I era, topics considered controversial – including interracial or same-sex relationships – became more prevalent in the New York theater scene.⁸ In response to these changes, concerted political efforts were made to limit what could be shown on stage.⁹ Police harassed theaters that staged plays involving thoughtfully portrayed gay characters and in 1927 the Wales Padlock Law was passed by the New York Legislature which made “depicting, or dealing with, the subject of sex degeneracy, or sex perversion” illegal. Theaters that disobeyed this law could be shut down, or “padlocked.”¹⁰ According to Amanda Davis, author of the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form for the Caffè Cino, “although the law was not often enforced and was protested by the theater community, it had a huge and censorious effect on the Broadway stage.”¹¹ The law remained in effect until 1967.

The 1950s in the United States witnessed the

passage of many anti-gay laws. The Red Scare not only prompted a search for Communist spies and sympathizers, but included gays and lesbians, who were assumed to be easy targets for Soviet agents. While there were no laws that actually made being homosexual illegal, the illegality of most homosexual acts made being gay a de facto crime. Gays and lesbians could be fired or denied housing. In the most extreme cases consenting homosexual adults who had sex within their own home could be convicted to life in prison, forced into psychiatric facilities, and even castrated. Even the 1960s, an era known for its rapid political and social change, saw for most of the decade little legal progress in the way of LGBT rights. By the end of the 1960s, homosexual sex was outlawed in every state but Illinois.¹²

New York City was no exception. According to author and LGBT civil rights historian David Carter, it was, in fact, “the city that most aggressively and systematically targeted gay men as criminals.”¹³ In New York, anti-gay legislation prohibited same sex kissing and even dancing. New York police could arrest anyone wearing less than three items of clothing that were deemed “appropriate” to their sex, and the State Liquor Authority made it illegal for a bar to serve someone who was known to be gay. Plainclothes police officers would frequently attempt to enter gay bars with the intention of entrapping gay clientele, and bars with gay patrons were constantly at risk of being raided and closed. In order to evade the law, many gay bars claimed to be private clubs and required clients to be members so as not to be regulated by the State Liquor Authority. Another outcome of New York’s discriminatory environment was that most gay bars were controlled by the Mafia, who could illicitly obtain liquor licenses and pay off the local police.¹⁴

The discriminatory environment of the 1950s

and 1960s meant that very few people would acknowledge that they were homosexual. In the 1950s, gay individuals and groups strove to merely have their right to exist recognized. The two major homosexual organizations of the period were the Mattachine Society, which began in Los Angeles in 1950 and opened a New York branch in 1955, and Daughters of Bilitis, a women’s organization, which started in San Francisco in 1955 and established a branch in New York City in 1958. They sponsored conferences and published newsletters. Membership in these and other smaller groups tended to be urban, white, and middle class but did not attract the younger or more radical members of the LGBT community.¹⁵

There was, however, some resistance and success on the part of the LGBT community. From 1965 to 1969 a series of peaceful July 4th demonstrations demanding equality took place in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia. These annual events were the largest peaceful demonstrations for gay rights of their time. In New York, in 1966, members of the Mattachine Society staged ‘sip-ins’ in which members of the group would approach bartenders and state that they were gay. Their actions prompted a court case, and the court’s decision forbade the State Liquor Authority from refusing to serve gay men.¹⁶

Greenwich Village

For more than 150 years, Greenwich Village has served as a center and a magnet for people who chose not to conform to society’s expectations. Associated with creativity and political activism, Greenwich Village became known within New York City and the country as the mecca for bohemian life and a place that embraced unconventional lifestyles.¹⁷ In the 1910s, as the Village became the preferred residence and gathering place for New York’s avant garde, a number of experimental

amateur theater groups sprang up. Among the earliest was the theatrical wing of the Liberal Club, which moved to 137 MacDougal Street (demolished) in 1913 and subsequently relocated to Midtown in 1918.¹⁸

The neighborhood's tolerance made the Village a haven for gays and lesbians as far back as the early-20th century and by the 1930s the Village's gay reputation was firmly established.¹⁹ After World War II, new restaurants, bars, and entertainment locales, including small experimental theaters and folk music venues, provided gathering spots for gays and lesbians, bohemians, beatniks, hippies, and musicians.²⁰ The Italian-owned San Remo Café on Bleecker Street became a particularly popular community hub, catering to the bohemian set, both gay and straight.²¹ Prominent homosexual patrons of the San Remo included Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, James Baldwin, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs, among others.²²

A number of new theaters and acting schools sprang up in the Village and older established theaters experienced new growth. *New York Times* critic Arthur Gelb traced the origins of what he termed the "renaissance" in the "off-Broadway movement" to the formation of New Stages, Inc., a production company established by a group of actors and technicians, which in 1947 began staging plays in the former Luxor movie theater on Bleecker Street, and which closed two years later.²³ In 1949, concern from the Actors' Equity Association labor union about unemployment among young theater professionals led the union to enter into an agreement with the Off Broadway Theatre League allowing Equity members to work in Off-Broadway productions for reduced pay with restrictions set on the size of eligible theaters. These concessions, which permitted producers to present shows at lower costs than on Broadway, created a demand in the Village "for leases on night clubs, movie houses,

lofts, stores, and cellars that might be converted into low-rent but non-hazardous theatres."²⁴

Coffeehouses also became an established part of Greenwich Village's cultural landscape during the 1950s and 1960s. These small, laid-back spaces with an espresso machine as their focal point were predominantly operated by the neighborhood's Italian community, but ultimately also facilitated a cultural mingling within the Village.²⁵ Centered primarily on MacDougal and Bleecker streets, cafes such as the Reggio, Dante, Borgia, and Figaro, became prominent cultural institutions in the area.²⁶ Over time, coffeehouses served as regular hangouts for a variety of creative types in the neighborhood including writers, artists, folk musicians, poets, and bohemians, many of whom were involved in innovative art and performance. As a result, coffeehouse culture in the Village became associated with the experimental work of artists in the area.²⁷ By the late 1950s, many venues were experimenting with modest stage productions and concerts, blurring the boundary between a café and a cabaret or theater.²⁸ In some cases, cafes staged short plays or revues, but the performances were sporadic and inconsistent.²⁹ The establishment of the Caffè Cino in 1958 would be the first of these coffeehouses to regularly host performances, initiating a new type of theater that became known as Off-Off-Broadway.

Greenwich Village's gay reputation made it the focus of the aggressive anti-gay policing policy that emerged in the 1950s. During election years, gay bars became targets of clean-up campaigns. As a result, these types of commercial businesses typically only survived a few months at a time and often maintained the atmosphere of a speakeasy. Discriminatory practices such as these continued in the 1960s and were particularly acute during the 1964-65 World's Fair. Conscious of how the city would be viewed, Mayor Robert Wagner led a clean-up effort that resulted in the closure of almost all of

the city's gay and lesbian bars. After the World's Fair, many new gay bars opened on Washington Square West, Eighth Street to Greenwich Avenue, and west on Christopher Street. A study conducted in the late 1960s found 26 bars, 12 nightclubs/restaurants, four hotels, and two private clubs that catered to members of the LGBT community within Greenwich Village.³⁰

No. 31 Cornelia Street: Early Building History³¹

The lot at 31 Cornelia Street was first developed c. 1833 when Charles Oakley, who had purchased multiple lots on this block, is recorded in the tax assessments as owning three lots with four houses on Cornelia Street near the corner of Bleecker Street. In 1867 Michael Maloney purchased the property at 31 Cornelia Street and ten years later, in 1877, he hired Benjamin Warner to design a new four-story tenement to replace the existing building on the front of the lot.³² The building was executed in the Italianate style, which had become the dominant architectural style in New York City by the 1850s.³³ Several types of businesses occupied the storefront before the Caffe Cino, including a grocery store during the 1910s to the 1930s.³⁴

Opening the Caffe Cino

Joseph "Joe" Cino was born in Buffalo, New York in 1931, the child of Sicilian immigrants. One of four brothers, Cino was an anomaly among his male family members and peers, with a keen interest in dance and opera. His thespian interests and the feelings of isolation he suffered at home prompted him to escape Buffalo in 1948 and start a new life in New York City, at only 16 years of age.³⁵

After his arrival in the city, he took a number of odd jobs, working in the cafeteria of the YMCA near Penn Station, the reservation department at the Hotel Statler, and the restaurant of the Howard

Johnson. In addition, Cino started to pursue his interest in dance, training with Alwin Nikolais at the Henry Street Settlement Playhouse in the Lower East Side. He took courses in dancing, acting, speech, and makeup artistry. However, because his physique was not well-suited to becoming a dancer, he soon stopped his studies and became a waiter at the Playhouse Café in Greenwich Village in 1958. The original concept of the Playhouse Café was to host poetry and play readings, though it seems this vision was never realized.³⁶

Even before Cino started working at the Playhouse Café, he toyed with the idea of opening his own coffeehouse. In 1965, Michael Smith of *The Village Voice* interviewed Cino, who stated, "I started thinking about the café in 1954. It would just come and go. It would usually go when there were too many people trying to have a part in it. I would talk about it with close friends and it would just dissolve away into nothing."³⁷

Scrimping and saving, Cino banked 400 dollars during his time at the Playhouse, just enough to provide the initial capital for his new business.³⁸ With this money, he started to look for a commercial space to open his coffee shop in 1958. At the time, he was dating Ed Franzen, a painter working at New York University, who was simultaneously seeking a studio and exhibition space for his work. The logical solution was to find one space that could accommodate both of their needs. Franzen identified a suitable location for rent at 31 Cornelia Street, describing it to Cino as a "big storefront studio."³⁹ The spot was advantageous due to its proximity to Washington Square Park, MacDougal Street, and New York University which had become hubs for LGBT people, artists, students, and bohemians. In addition, the location had easy access to the subway stations at West 4th and Christopher streets, as well as to Sixth Avenue, West 4th Street, Seventh Avenue South, and Bleecker Street that were all heavily

utilized by pedestrians. According to Cino, it was his Sicilian heritage that swayed the Italian landlady to rent to them. The space was in “ruins,” with a toilet, sink, and fireplace as the interior’s defining characteristics. However, Cino was undeterred by its state of disrepair, and immediately began to envision how he would arrange the café’s counter and coffee machine.⁴⁰

The Caffè Cino Art Gallery opened as a café and art exhibition space in 1958. The occasion was described by Cino in 1965:

We opened on a Friday night in early December, 1958. There were 30 people in there, and they were friends. We had one of those old coffee machines, like a Vittorio Arduino, with the eagles on it. It turned out the machine had no gaskets in it, and at pressure the coffee gushed out all over the place. So I borrowed coffee pots all over the neighborhood and set them up under the counter and pretended I was getting the coffee out of the machine. I had never thought of having a waiter, so one of the friends took care of the other friends.⁴¹

The café was closed during the day and open at night, allowing Cino to work other jobs; between 1958 and 1960, Cino worked at the American Laundry Machinery Company. This second job, according to *The Village Voice*, provided the financial support he needed to keep the Caffè Cino open.⁴²

A Space for Experimental Theater

During the 1965 interview with *The Village Voice*,

Cino described the original vision for his business, emphasizing in particular the significance of the café’s mood and ambiance:

My idea was always to start with a beautiful, intimate, warm, non-commercial, friendly atmosphere where people could come and not feel pressured or harassed. I also thought anything could happen. I knew a lot of painters, so my thought immediately was, I’ll hang all their work. I was thinking of a café with poetry readings, with lectures, maybe with dance concerts. The one thing I never thought of was fully staged productions of plays.⁴³

Although Joe Cino did not anticipate it, his coffee shop thrived as a venue for staging plays. After opening, the café’s focus on visual art soon shifted towards various types of live performance. By March 1959, the café, which became known as just the Caffè Cino or the Cino, was hosting Sunday poetry readings and by February 1960, a series called the “Caffè Cino Reportory [sic]” started that consisted of Sunday night theatrical readings. The first of these, performed on February 7, 1960, included a reading of *A Christmas Memory* by Truman Capote and a scene from *The Importance of Being Ernest* by Oscar Wilde. As Davis points out, “These works by two prominent gay writers reveal an early LGBT influence at the café...”⁴⁴

The earliest shows staged at the Cino were adaptations of existing plays and the works of Cino’s friends, but as time passed and the venue’s reputation grew, more and more people submitted original work in the hopes of exposure at the Caffè Cino.⁴⁵ As *The Village Voice* noted, the space “quickly became

important as New York's most tenacious and active café theatre."⁴⁶ The Cino's success, however, was achieved in unexpected ways, with Joe Cino employing some unusual business techniques: preferring not to read scripts, Cino relied primarily on the astrological signs of the playwrights who approached him in order to decide what would be performed at his cafe.⁴⁷ *Flyspray*, written by James Howard, was the first original play performed at the Caffe Cino during the summer of 1960. The next year, Doric Wilson became the Cino's first resident playwright. Davis points out that "[Wilson's] four plays that year – two of which were early plays that dealt explicitly with homosexuality – helped to establish the Cino as a venue for new plays."⁴⁸

Within four years of its opening, the Caffe Cino had established itself as an important performance venue and experimental theater.⁴⁹ By this time, a new show was performed nearly each week, twice per night, with a third show at 1:00 a.m. on Fridays and Saturdays. Cino recalled the challenges of those first years and the difficulties involved in increasing the number of performances to two per night: "There were many nights when we went on with no people there, just performing for the room. I feel the room is grateful, something happens to the walls."⁵⁰ Plays, which usually had a runtime of approximately 30 minutes, were always introduced by Cino, who would conclude his remarks with the phrase, "It's magic time."⁵¹ The first show that was performed on this two-show-per-night schedule was a 32-minute-long adaptation of *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll in 1962. Cino described it as "one of the most beautiful things we had at the Cino," due largely to the lighting by Johnny Dodd, which illuminated only the actors and left the rest of the space (and the audience) in total darkness. Cino went on to note, "I think it was the first time we had that kind of magic."⁵² A total of 81 productions were performed between 1963 and 1964.⁵³

Establishing the Off-Off-Broadway Movement

Cino's unconventional approach – both in terms of production and finances – created an atmosphere ripe for creativity and experimentation, leading to the establishment of what became known as Off-Off-Broadway. *The Village Voice* stated of Cino, "He thinks of himself as a café proprietor rather than a theatrical producer, and his role is to provide opportunities for people to work. The Caffe Cino developed its identity not according to any plan of its creator but was permitted to create itself."⁵⁴ While Broadway and Off-Broadway productions were constrained by commercial pressures, expected to make a profit and adhere to traditional financial structures for reimbursing performers and crews, productions at the Caffe Cino were executed with little to no budget. Playwrights, who were not charged a fee to use the space, provided their own costumes, props, and sets. This approach forced playwrights, directors, stage hands, and actors to be innovative and creative.⁵⁵ The cafe accommodated approximately 20 small tables that could seat about 40 to 45 patrons. Audience members were not charged to attend productions; rather, all that was required was a minimum one dollar purchase at the café.⁵⁶ Actors were generally unpaid and were not part of the Actors' Equity Association labor union. A collection was taken at the end of shows and any proceeds were divvied up between the performers.⁵⁷

Joe Cino thought that the intimate nature of the café served to enhance performances. According to Davis, "For Cino, the ambience and intimacy of the room was as vital to the experience as the play itself. Of prime importance to him was that the audience at his café should feel welcome to engage with the performance, as opposed to other established arts venues where the experience could be more intimidating."⁵⁸ The proximity of the performers and audience was one of the Cino's

defining characteristics and Joe Cino loved the precarious tension that was created between people in a small space. He expressed a particular thrill at the idea that a hot drink could spill on someone if the actors failed to be aware of the spectators.⁵⁹ Years later, it was often the intensely intimate environment and comforting atmosphere that were most fondly remembered by the artists who shared their work there.⁶⁰

During the late 1950s, playwright, director, lighting designer and theater critic Michael Smith started writing a column in *The Village Voice* called “Café Theater.”⁶¹ As this type of experimental theater became more popular, he started another column in 1960 for “Café Dramas,” which was soon retitled “Off-Off-Broadway.”⁶² The first column with this title appeared in the November 24, 1960 issue.⁶³ Cino himself was reluctant about the name of the movement he was pioneering; he insisted, “We’re not off-off-Broadway...we’re in café.”⁶⁴ Nevertheless, the label persisted and the Cino’s role in establishing the movement has become well-accepted. Author Stephen J. Bottoms, in his book *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement*, asserts that indeed, the Caffe Cino was the “first off-off-Broadway venue of importance to emerge in the early 1960s.”⁶⁵

Other venues in Greenwich Village and elsewhere were also performing experimental theater, but the Caffe Cino was unique in its consistency during the 10 years it was open. In the Caffe Cino National Register report, Davis asserts that “although theater that meets the definition of Off-Off-Broadway may have been performed in other small venues, the Cino is especially significant in the history of the genre because it remained in operation long enough to nurture and support the art form, thus allowing Off-Off-Broadway to become established.”⁶⁶ The regularity of performances at the

Caffe Cino meant that artists, audiences, and critics had regular opportunities to witness experimental theater, form a community around it, and become aware of the movement that was occurring.⁶⁷

Harassment from the police, who systematically targeted and fined coffee shops patronized by the gay community, made it particularly difficult for most small venues to stage plays regularly. This resulted in the closure – either temporary or permanent – of numerous such venues in Greenwich Village. Often encouraged and even prompted by conservative neighborhood residents, the police frequently cited the lack of a cabaret license as an excuse to harass businesses with patrons that were considered problematic but were increasingly ubiquitous in Greenwich Village – mainly gay men and women, African Americans, and groups with unconventional lifestyles. Although Joe Cino had a valid restaurant license, he was opposed to serving alcohol at his café; in order to procure the cabaret license cited by the police, he would also need to acquire a liquor license. Joe Cino refused to yield, and instead, the Cino survived because he regularly paid off the police. In addition, when fines continued to mount and Joe Cino was unable to pay employees, he would find other jobs during the day to cover the costs, or friends would volunteer to work in the café for free.⁶⁸

Between 1960 and 1965, 150 new plays were performed at the Caffe Cino.⁶⁹ *The Madness of Lady Bright*, a play about an aging drag queen written by Lanford Wilson in 1964, earned critical acclaim and is viewed as the Cino’s first major success.⁷⁰ By highlighting the work of emerging playwrights, the Cino also established a reputation as a venue for American plays, rather than the more established European plays that were frequently preferred by larger commercial venues.⁷¹

The Caffe Cino witnessed increased critical attention, and with it acclaim, during the mid-1960s.

For its productions between 1964 and 1965, artists from the Cino were the recipients of several Obie Awards, which *The Village Voice* usually presented to deserving Off-Broadway productions. The Caffe Cino won an award (in conjunction with Café La MaMa, another Off-Off-Broadway theater) “for creating opportunities for new playwrights to confront audiences and gain experience of the real theater.”⁷² Over the next few years, other artists from the Cino were awarded Obies including H.M. Koutoukas, Sam Shepard, and Johnny Dodd.⁷³

In 1965, a fire destroyed the Cino’s interior and boards were placed over much of the facade. The theater community rallied around the Cino to raise funds for rebuilding, demonstrating the level of respect and reverence commanded by the Caffe Cino at the time. Playwright H.M. Koutoukas organized a benefit held at a space donated by established playwright Edward Albee inside the Writer’s Stage Theatre. Albee had become a loyal patron of the Caffe Cino. During this period, the Cino’s reputation as a hub for gay artists was also becoming more established and consequently, the harassment from police continued to increase. Perhaps inspired by the boards already present after the fire, Joe Cino started attaching posters to the facade to shield the venue from the prying eyes of passing police. Davis describes how the posters, which were mostly created by Kenny Burgess, were “intentionally abstract in design” with “upside-down and sideways letters and art [that] would be easily readable by Cino regulars but [would] appear to be artwork to unsuspecting cops.”⁷⁴

After the fire, the Caffe Cino reopened on May 18, 1965 with H.M. Koutoukas’ *With Creatures Make My Way*. The play titled *Dames at Sea* was performed at the Cino in 1966 with Bernadette Peters as the lead. This was Peters’ breakout performance and the play is considered the venue’s greatest hit. The musical ran for three months, the longest of any

performance at the Cino.⁷⁵ In the National Register report, Davis asserts that “By the mid-1960s, critics beyond *The Village Voice* and a few other small-circulation papers began to pay more attention to Off-Off-Broadway as its own movement for new plays as well as an alternative, rather than a stepping stone, to mainstream theater.”⁷⁶

New York City’s First Gay Theater

Intrinsic to the Cino’s success as a significant and innovative performance space in its own right, was the influence of the LGBT community on the venue’s productions. As a gay man living and working in Greenwich Village, many of Joe Cino’s friends and acquaintances who frequented the café in its early years and who became involved in its theater scene were also gay men. Joe Cino worked closely with several other friends at the café, all of whom were gay or bisexual men. Jonathan “Jon” Torrey, who was Cino’s boyfriend, was the electrician and first lighting designer. He rigged the Cino’s electrical system to connect to the public streetlamps instead of the building’s electrical meter. As a result, the Cino was able to steal electricity from the city grid, and the lights inside the café were coordinated with those on the street, going on and off at the same time.⁷⁷ Kenny Burgess was the dishwasher and also took on the role of designer, creating the posters and collages that advertised plays and were plastered on the facade. And lastly, Johnny Dodd stepped in as the café’s waiter, also becoming the main lighting designer for the theater in 1961, described by Davis as “responsible for the innovative lighting that became a key component in the café’s productions.”⁷⁸

The lack of a traditional financial structure (and with it, any expectations for profit) and its safe, encouraging environment freed emerging playwrights to engage with topics that were relevant to their own personal experiences. Often, this meant

incorporating themes and narratives significant to the gay community, which outside of the Cino, were considered unconventional and taboo. As a result, the space became a center for the LGBT community in Greenwich Village, an alternative to the bars, bathhouses, and parks that were the primary cruising scenes for gay men at the time.⁷⁹

Michael Bronski, in his book *A Queer History of the United States*, argues that the “radicalism of Caffe Cino... was in presenting plays with explicit gay content in an openly gay environment.”⁸⁰ The author of *Caffe Cino: Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway*, Wendell C. Stone, asserts that the Caffe Cino was in fact “the first venue to regularly feature work by and about gay men.”⁸¹ Theater at the Cino consistently acknowledged the existence and experiences of gay people, without the usual homophobic stereotypes.⁸² This was achieved in large part because gay people were involved in many (if not all) aspects of the production. As a result, a realistic homosexual experience – unaltered by negativity and bigotry – organically became a critical component of the context for the Cino on and off stage.

In 1967, Joe Cino tragically committed suicide after the accidental death of his partner, Jon Torrey. Cino’s body was found in the Caffe Cino on the morning of March 31 and he died on April 2, 1967. Several people tried to manage the Caffe Cino after Joe Cino’s death, but harassment from the police intensified and mounting fines for the lack of a cabaret license eventually caused the Cino to permanently close on March 17, 1968.⁸³

The Caffe Cino’s Legacy

Starting in 1958 as a coffeehouse and art gallery, the Caffe Cino is credited with establishing the Off-Off-Broadway theater movement, being the first gay theater in New York City, and launching the careers of numerous significant people in the theater world,

particularly gay artists.⁸⁴ Over the 10 years it was in operation, 225 original and revival plays were staged at the Cino. Many of these works openly depicted homosexual themes on stage and in a positive manner for the first time, normalizing and destigmatizing experiences of the gay community. *Herald Tribune* cultural critic John Gruen asserted that the “Caffe Cino presented the outrageous, the blasphemous, the zany, the wildly poetic, the embarrassingly trite, the childish, and frequently, the moving and the beautiful.”⁸⁵

The early careers of a number of significant artists (playwrights, directors, actors, etc.) are associated with the Caffe Cino, including John Guare, Sam Shepard, and Lanford Wilson among others.⁸⁶ Several other Off-Off-Broadway theaters emerged in New York City during the 1960s, most notably Ellen Stewart’s Café La MaMa (now La MaMa Experimental Theater Club), Al Carmines’ Judson Poets’ Theatre, and Ralph Cook’s Theatre Genesis.⁸⁷ The Cino also inspired the establishment of other experimental theater venues around the world.⁸⁸ The narratives told, careers launched and theaters opened as a result of the Caffe Cino’s oeuvres underscore the significant role it played in establishing the value of experimental and gay theater and pioneering the Off-Off-Broadway movement.

Conclusion

No. 31 Cornelia Street is located within the city’s Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II, which was designated in 2010. The building is also a contributing element to the South Village Historic District, which was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 2014. On November 9, 2017, the Caffe Cino was listed in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A in the areas of performing arts and social history as the “first venue of importance to continuously stage Off-Off-

Broadway theater, then a newly-emerging movement, and for its role in the development of gay theater and support of gay playwrights at a time when depicting homosexuality on stage was illegal.”⁸⁹

The Caffe Cino modernized theater by validating the experience of gay artists and providing them a safe space and accepting community within which to share their work in a meaningful way. The recognition and encouragement of the homosexual experience that was exhibited at the Caffe Cino, both on and off stage, was an anomaly during its time, but helped build the foundation for the LGBT liberation movement that was subsequently launched by the Stonewall riots in 1969, just one year after the Cino closed.⁹⁰ Today, the storefront at no. 31 Cornelia Street stands as a significant reminder of the Caffe Cino’s presence from 1958 to 1968. Despite its short-lived existence, the Caffe Cino’s legacy in the realm of avant-garde theater is widely recognized.⁹¹ Playwright Robert Patrick succinctly captured the significance of the Caffe Cino as a dynamic and ground-breaking establishment: “Grubby, glorious, historical, hysterical, dazzling, dirty, creative, destructive, the top, the bottom, the beginning.”⁹²

Endnotes

- ¹ Information in this section is adapted from Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC), *Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II Designation Report (LP 2366)* Building Profiles (New York: City of New York, 2010), prepared by Olivia Klose, Virginia Kurshan, and Marianne Percival, 149.
- ² National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)* (listed November 9, 2017), nomination prepared by Amanda Davis, Section 7; 2.
- ³ Approximate dates determined using the following sources for photographs: New York City Department of Finance Photographs (c. 1983-88), New York City Municipal Archives; Google Street View Image Capture (May 2009); LPC photo collection for Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II (2010).
- ⁴ National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)* (listed November 9, 2017), nomination prepared by Amanda Davis, Section 7; 2.
- ⁵ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 7; 2; New York City Department of Finance Photographs (c. 1983-88), New York City Municipal Archives.
- ⁶ Information in this section is borrowed from LPC, *Stonewall Inn Designation Report (LP-2574)* (New York: City of New York, 2015), prepared by Christopher D. Brazee, Corrine Engelbert, and Gale Harris, 4-5.
- ⁷ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 23.
- ⁸ “Wales Padlock Law,” The Historical Dictionary of the American Theater, accessed May 16, 2019, http://american_theatre.enacademic.com/1314/Wales_Padlock_Law.
- ⁹ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 23-24.
- ¹⁰ New York City Historic Sites Project, “Belasco Theater,” accessed May 16, 2019, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/belasco-theater/>; “Wales Padlock Law,” The Historical Dictionary of the American Theater, accessed May 16, 2019, http://american_theatre.enacademic.com/1314/Wales_Padlock_Law.
- ¹¹ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 24.
- ¹² LPC, *Stonewall Inn Designation Report (LP-2574)*, 4.
- ¹³ David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2004), 17.
- ¹⁴ LPC, *Stonewall Inn Designation Report (LP-2574)*, 4-5.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ LPC, *South Village Historic District Designation Report (LP-2546)* (New York: City of New York, 2013), prepared by Christopher D. Brazee, Cynthia Danza, Gale Harris, Virginia Kurshan, Jennifer L. Most, Theresa C. Noonan, Matthew A. Postal, Donald G. Presa, and Jay Shockley, 40.
- ¹⁹ LPC, *Stonewall Inn Designation Report (LP-2574)*, 5.
- ²⁰ NRHP, *South Village Historic District, New York, New York (14000026)* (listed February 24, 2014), nomination prepared by Andrew Dolkart, Section 8; 1.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 27.
- ²² Information adapted from the LPC, *South Village Historic District Designation Report (LP-2546)*, 38.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ²⁴ Arthur Gelb, “Action Off Broadway,” *New York Times* (November 7, 1954), X1; On the Equity Agreement, see “Off-Broadway Group Asks Equity Drop Ban,” *New York Times* (August 1, 1949), 15; “Rules for Actors Modified,” *New York Times* (September 18, 1949), X3; cited in LPC, *South Village Historic District Designation Report (LP-2546)*, 41.
- ²⁵ NRHP, *South Village Historic District, New York, New York (14000026)*, Section 8; 28-29.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 29.
- ²⁷ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 4.
- ²⁸ “Voice of the Beatnik is Being Stilled in the Village,” *New York Times* (October 20, 1960), 44; cited in LPC, *South Village Historic District Designation Report (LP-2546)*, 43.

²⁹ LPC, *South Village Historic District Designation Report (LP-2546)*, 45; NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 12.

³⁰ LPC, *Stonewall Inn Designation Report (LP-2574)*, 5.

³¹ LPC, *Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II Designation Report (LP-2366) Building Profiles*, 149.

³² New Building permit NB 183-1877; NRHP, *South Village Historic District, New York, New York (14000026)*, Section 7; 31.

³³ LPC, *South Village Historic District Designation Report (LP-2546)*, 13.

³⁴ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 3.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 3.

³⁷ Michael Smith, “Joe Cino’s World Goes Up in Flames,” *The Village Voice* (March 11, 1965), 14; according to the NRHP, *Caffe Cino* report, this was the only known interview that Cino participated in; NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 4.

³⁸ Smith, 14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 4-5.

⁴¹ Smith, 14.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 5.

⁴⁵ Smith, 15.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁷ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 6.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 6.

⁵⁰ Smith, 14.

⁵¹ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 6.

⁵² Smith, 14.

⁵³ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 6.

⁵⁴ Smith, 15.

⁵⁵ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 16.

⁵⁶ Leonard Harris, “Off-Off-B’way is in Up Phase,” *New York World-Telegram and Sun* (January 13, 1966), 9.

⁵⁷ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Smith, 15.

⁶⁰ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 8.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 12.

⁶² LPC, *South Village Historic District Designation Report (LP-2546)*, 45.

⁶³ According to the NRHP *Caffe Cino* report, credit is usually given to either Michael Smith or Jerry Tallmer (former chief dramatic critic at *The Village Voice*) for coining the term “Off-Off-Broadway”; however, both people deny credit. The report cites Stephen J. Bottom’s book *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* where he writes, “...in all likelihood [the term was] intended more as a joke than as serious recognition of a new substratum of New York theater.” Stephen J. Bottoms, *Playing Underground: A Critical History of the 1960s Off-Off-Broadway Movement* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 40; cited in NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 12.

⁶⁴ Smith, 15.

⁶⁵ Bottoms, 39, cited in NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 13.

⁶⁶ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 13.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 14.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 15.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 15.

⁷² The award is included in the Dominic Collection, cited in NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*,

Section 8; 17.

⁷³ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 17.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 15.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 9-10.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 17.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 6.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 5-6.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 22.

⁸⁰ Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 198.

⁸¹ Wendell C. Stone, *Caffe Cino: The Birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 43, cited in NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 25.

⁸² According to Amanda Davis in the NRHP *Caffe Cino* report, the Cherry Grove Playhouse predates the Caffe Cino and is described as the first and oldest continually operating gay theater in America; however, the theater, located in Cherry Grove on Fire Island, was a seasonal resort where plays were only performed during the summer and was largely only accessible to wealthy people on vacation. The Caffe Cino, in contrast, staged productions all year in a large and accessible urban center. Information cited in the NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 24.

⁸³ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 11.

⁸⁴ Bronski, 198.

⁸⁵ Brooks McNamara, "Something Glorious: Greenwich Village and the Theater," in Rick Beard and Leslie Cohen Berlowitz, eds. *Greenwich Village: Culture and Counterculture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1993), 317, cited in LPC, *Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II Designation Report (LP 2366)*, 12.

⁸⁶ Artists associated with the Cino include: playwrights Robert Heide, Claris Nelson, Robert Patrick, Sam Shepard, David Starkweather, Lanford Wilson, Tom Eyen, Paul Foster, John Guare, William M. Hoffman, H. M. Koutoukas, Charles Stanley, Ronald Tavel, Jean-Claude van Itallie, Jeff Weiss, and Doric Wilson; directors Robert Dahdah, Neil Flanagan, Marshall W. Mason, Tom O'Horgan, and Roberta Sklar; and actors Helen Hanft, Harvey Keitel, Al Pacino, Bernadette Peters, and Shirley

Stoler. The NRHP Registration Form for the Caffe Cino includes a comprehensive Appendix with biographies of many of the artists that were involved in the Caffe Cino; NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 18 and 31-39.

⁸⁷ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 16-17.

⁸⁸ These include: Ridiculous Theater Company and Hot Peaches in New York City, the Cockettes in San Francisco, as well as several in England: the King's Head, The Bush, the Traverse Theatre Club, and the Arts Lab in Covent Garden; Bronski, 198; NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 20.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, Section 8; 1.

⁹⁰ NRHP, *Caffe Cino, New York, New York (100001802)*, Section 8; 26.

⁹¹ LPC, *Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II Designation Report (LP 2366)*, 12.

⁹² *Yonkers New York Herald Statesman* (March 25, 1979), 6.

Findings and Designation

The Caffe Cino

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building and site, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that the Caffe Cino has a special character and a special historical and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Caffe Cino and designates Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 590, Lot 47 in part, consisting of the land beneath the building's footprint, as shown on the attached map, as its Landmark Site.



31 Cornelia Street
Sarah Moses, June, 2019



31 Cornelia Street Storefront
Sarah Moses, June, 2019



The Caffe Cino
New York Public
Library, 1965



31 Cornelia Street
New York City Department of Taxes Photograph
(c. 1938-1943), Courtesy NYC Municipal Archives



Storefront detail, 31 Cornelia Street
Sarah Moses, June 1940

