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SUNDAYS ON BROADWAY

This year marks the tenth anniversary of Cathy Weis' "Sundays on Broadway," a performance series that welcomes experimentation from a curated group of seasoned and emerging artists hosted intimately in Weis' SoHo loft. The series is one of only a handful of its kind that still exists in New York today: Weis' building, which is located on Broadway between Prince and Spring Streets, was once home to the postmodern "downtown" dance scene of the 1970s. Today, her loft is one of the last remaining artist-occupied apartments in what is now one of Manhattan's most expensive neighborhoods.

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Weis is a choreographer, performer, and video artist whose experimental performance work has won her a Bessie Award and a Guggenheim Fellowship. As a young dancer, Weis danced for the Louisville Ballet and attended Bennington College then “played in a cello quartet, tap danced on the streets of San Francisco, and did a stint as a disco queen.” She moved to New York in the 1980s and bought her current apartment—which she dubbed WeisAcres—in 2005 from postmodern dancer Simone Forti.

“Simone wanted to keep [the loft] in the dance community, and whenever she was back in New York, she could stay here,” Weis said.

Forti was one of a number of postmodern, improvisational dancers who occupied the Broadway lofts in the 1970s. Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, David Gordon, Frances Alenikoff, Elaine Summers, Douglas Dunn, and others all lived and created there.

“They were all right here” Weis said. “You’d just go down the hall and see what what’s-her-name was working on. There was a cross pollination going on.”

“Sundays on Broadway” is not necessarily an effort to recreate the salons of the past, but its mission is similarly to provide a space as intimate where artists can mingle and network while sharing work at multiple stages of development, particularly given the fact that many of these opportunities have disappeared.

“The ’70s was an absolutely unique cultural situation,” said Douglas Dunn, who with Brown, Gordon, and others was a founding member of the improvisational group Grand Union and has his own company, Douglas Dunn and Dancers. Dunn still lives in Weis’ building, “across the wall,” and occasionally hosts his own salons.

“This neighborhood, SoHo, was completely empty. That’s why people like me, and a lot of painters, moved in—secretly, at first—to these beautiful big spaces and used them as studios. Then, so many people did that, that it became a bit of a scene. There were all kinds of artists, and we all hung out together.”

Dunn said there were parties every night, gatherings which were not only social, but artistic.

“You’d go to somebody’s loft and somebody would end up playing the piano or dancing,” Dunn said. “They were ‘culture’ parties.”

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Cathy Weis and Simone Forti at "Sundays on Broadway." Photograph by Richard Termine

Unfortunately, this artistic haven didn't last long. As retail chains moved in and rents increased in the 1980s and '90s, artists began moving out.

"In 15 to 20 years, the neighborhood went from derelict to completely high-end," Dunn said.

As artists left, so did their art. The "cross-pollinations" and "culture parties" became few and far between. To Weis, this was a huge loss for artists, not just socially, but artistically.

"Dancers need that step in their progression, where they can show [their dances] often, take chances without being so right, can make changes, and see what they've got," Weis said.

In 2003, she created "Sundays on Broadway's" first iteration, "The Salon Series." "The Salon Series" presented Weis' own work to small, invited audiences. In 2014, Weis decided she'd open up her floor to other artists. She invited friends to be the new program's curators and changed the name to "Sundays on Broadway."

"It was much more interesting to see what the curators brought in, and the new audiences who came," Weis said.

In "Sundays on Broadway's" ten-year history, the program has featured over 150 different artists. Weis has been pleasantly surprised by its attendance: most Sundays, her loft is packed to the brim with audience members.

The series makes a point of pairing well-established artists with younger artists, and this season, which ran April 14 through May 19, included performances by Yvonne Rainer and Stephen Petronio, among others.



Vidy Shick and Eva Karczag at "Sundays on Broadway." Photograph by Richard Termine

"It's very unusual in that Cathy gives opportunities to young choreographers to show their work along with more experienced people like me," said Rainer, who has performed frequently for "Sundays on Broadway" and presented work twice this season.

"A lot of the work is in progress, they're just beginning to work things out, so it's a very important resource. So much pressure is on young choreographers now to get big grants and a big theater to show their early work. Well, you don't have to be under that sort of pressure with a space like this one," Rainer said.

"What does it mean to be at the beginning of something?" Jon Kinzel, a 2023-24 Guggenheim Fellow who was one of Weis' very first curators and also a performer this season, asked. "You learn things through performance, which is why this series is so important for working artists."

Additionally, Kinzel acknowledged the community that evolves out of a series such as this, particularly given the distinctive space.

"The kind of rubbing up against shoulders and elbows of artists is invaluable in that intimate scale," Kinzel said.

"Sundays on Broadway" is consciously intergenerational. In an effort to be even more inclusive of younger artists, Weis co-curates each season with a different, younger choreographer. This season's co-curator was Owen Prum, a dancer and choreographer who is also co-founder of the artist-run performance space, Pageant, which is located in Brooklyn. Prum selected four artists, and each one appeared on a different Sunday along with three of Weis' choices.

“You can see the living history. Watching younger artists perform alongside choreographers like Yvonne Rainer and others, you can see the direct influence and lineage,” Prum said.

Last season, Prum was a performer. He commented on the value of the experience, particularly for younger choreographers and performers, like himself, who never had the chance to experience the 1970s downtown dance salons.

“It’s incredibly unique. I don’t think there’s anything else like it,” Prum said. “You get a taste of how it used to be. There’s a distinct flavor of just being on Broadway—now across the street from Uniqlo!

“And that’s not to romanticize the past, but it is incredibly precious. It’s a gift that it still exists today.”

CECILIA WHALEN

Cecilia Whalen is a writer and dancer from Charlotte, North Carolina. She is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and holds a bachelor's degree in French. Currently, Cecilia is studying composition at the Martha Graham School for Contemporary Dance in New York City. She lives in Brooklyn.

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INTERVIEWS | Candice Thompson

Common Language

Pre-pandemic, queerness and ballet were two terms not often put together. So, when choreographer Adriana Pierce started bringing a community of queer-identifying people together on Zoom—cis women, trans people of all genders, and nonbinary dancers—it felt like a watershed moment for many of them.

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Living Doll

Watching Pacific Northwest Ballet’s “Coppélia,” which the Seattle company generously released as a digital stream for distant fans, you could easily fall down two historically rewarding rabbit holes.

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REVIEWS | Gracia Haby

Hammer Time

There was a series of warnings that led up to the moment it all fell apart, but no-one listened. Everything appeared to follow a linear trajectory, an illuminated, diagonal path that led straight to the suspended glass orb at the foot of the stage.

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REVIEWS | Victoria Looseleaf

A Fourth Jewel

If, as George Balanchine once so famously pronounced, “Ballet is woman,” then director and choreographer Lincoln Jones showed off the gals in his troupe, American Contemporary Ballet (ACB), to great effect in his world premiere, “Sapphires.”

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