

A CRITICAL TRIBUTE TO MIMI LIEN

by Loren Noveck

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JACK feels like a throwback, in the best possible sense, to an earlier moment in NY indie theater, but with all the social conscience and consciousness of our complicated modern moment. I'm betraying my age to say this, but I remember the first New York Fringe Festival, back when downtown Manhattan was so thick with small venues you could trip over them. You weren't always going to see something great at One Dream or the Present Company Theatorium or Collective Unconscious, but you were always going to find a spirit of collective ingenuity, stubbornness, and necessity-is-the-mother-of-invention creativity that made its own community as it went. A few of those spaces are still making great work--HERE, constantly reinventing itself as its longtime space morphs; the New Ohio, relocated into a space without perhaps all the decrepit charm of its former SoHo home but with the artistic leadership intact--but that spirit of improvisation and unpredictability and commitment to the integrity of the work even/especially when it's done on a shoestring gets harder and harder to sustain, especially as formerly affordable and moderately commutable neighborhoods in the outer boroughs continue to gentrify.

So for me, the first time I went to JACK felt like coming home. A space I could walk to, to see the kind of weird, risky, passionate work that I love even when I don't like it? Sign me up. From the beginning, they've been presenting work by artists you want to know--director Lileana Blain-Cruz, just before her first show at New York Theatre Workshop. Playwright Celine Song in (I think) her New York premiere. Kareem M. Lucas before his Cherry Lane residency. You get it.

My second visit there was a complete debacle--I got delayed by a subway fire and then an incompetent cab driver on my way to a show I was scheduled to review, a show that didn't have a press agent so I had no one to alert that I was late, but the house manager let me slip in once I got there and it turned out the show was a workshop that wasn't even meant to be open to press. But I liked it, and being there, so much that I didn't even care.

Since then, they've relocated, but stayed in the neighborhood, and that's the other thing I really admire--they're committed to place, and to activism alongside art in a way that's genuinely mission driven. Clinton Hill/Bed Stuy is--as we all know--one among many rapidly gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhoods, and JACK's engagement with ongoing racial and economic justice initiatives matters; it's reflected in both their programming and the makeup of their board. It's what's enabled them to pivot so quickly to serving as a food distribution hub in the current crisis, turning that energy, creative drive, and the need to make something happen into a vital direction.

Loren Noveck is a writer, editor, dramaturg, and recovering Off-Off-Broadway producer, who was for many years the literary manager of Six Figures Theatre Company. She has written for *The Brooklyn Rail*, nytheatre.com, and NYTheater now, and currently writes for *The Brooklyn Paper*, exeuntnyc.com and *WIT Online*. In her non-theatrical life, she works in book publishing