

THEATER

"Jar the Floor" playwright Cheryl West knows how to provoke a reaction.

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The Arts

THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE • SUNDAY, MARCH 13, 1994

They dare, and they deserve to be nurtured

By ANNE MARIE WELSH
Arts Critic

Before Culture Clash and Whoopi Goldberg and Eric Bogosian played theaters and television, Sushi presented them.

Before Guillermo Gomez-Peña became a MacArthur Foundation "genius," Sushi made him artist-in-residence.

Before choreographers Bebe Miller and Joe Goode wowed New York, Sushi presented them.

And before Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, John Fleck and Karen Finley became the notorious defundos of the Bush-era National Endowment for the Arts, Sushi produced them all — over and over and over again.

Such artists embodied the performance gallery's mission, defined 14 years ago by founder Lynn Schuette, the self-effacing painter who lived in her Eighth Avenue performance gallery. Rather than producing just one art form, she supported what she calls "horizontal programming": the artists shared a value system, whatever their discipline.

The words "gay," "multicultural," "feminist," "lesbian," "multidisciplinary" are now common in discussions of American arts in the '90s. They made their way into the local media in coverage of Sushi programs.

Because artists such as these are forecasters, they raised issues that crested in the turbulent waves now crashing through American culture.

Despite these contributions, Sushi is in trouble, its survival and its continuing programs threatened by the loss last June of its Eighth Avenue performance space and by a \$40,000 debt. Until last year, the budget was \$280,000 annually.

And to make matters worse, a Sushi-for-the-'90s, Cafe Cinema, a vital, exciting coffee-movie-performance house run by filmmakers Isaac Arntstein and Jude Eberhard, has shut its colorful downtown doors, hoping for an angel or a new landlord to help them continue the programs.

Though the histories of these two artist-run spaces are different, they're alike in their significance. Both homeless and visionary, Sushi and Cafe Cinema are as important to the cultural life of the city — and to its future as a cosmopolitan urban center — as the Symphony or the Old Globe.

Eberhard and Arntstein are longtime admirers of Sushi; Arntstein's video collaboration with Gomez-Peña had been showcased there. They invested \$80,000 in an unused warehouse at Front and Cedar downtown, opening it as Cafe Cinema in June 1992.

By design, their programming never duplicated Sushi's, the performances focusing upon film or video enhanced work. The range was wide and unpredictable: a weekly feast of films; a scholar's

See Dare on Page E-7

Hotel revamp is real thing

El Cortez Hotel is making a comeback. A citywide salute, please, for developer Mark Grosvenor and the City Council, who shook hands last week on a deal to restore the skyline's headboard edifice to its 1927 grandeur as a residence hotel.

If I were the apartment-dwelling type, I'd be on my way right now with a deposit for Grosvenor, because a restored El Cortez is going to be the place to live downtown in a decade or so.

The hill, the location, the high ceilings, the thick

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Dare

Sushi and Cafe Cinema important to the city

Continued from E-1

lecture on the socioeconomic collapse of contemporary Peru; a comic-multimedia discourse by artists Richard Lou and Bobby Sanchez on white mummies unearthed in El Cajon by Latino anthropologists; a performance-discussion from the comedy quartet Latins Anonymous; the local debut of the satiric comedy team Chicano Secret Service; music, food and film of Cajuns and Creoles.

The place closed when the money ran out, at the end of the 1993 season, after the ebullient satiric remix of a Mexican wrestling film "El Luchador Chicano" with the parody script performed by blazingly talented Latino actors. Since those December performances, no coffee, no food, no programs.

Sushi's problems began when it suffered a 15 percent across-the-board cut in government and private funding and a series of costly burglaries. The eviction by the Salvation Army, on top of the accumulated debt, has scattered and limited programming this year. The annual Neofest festival of new work is on hold, with just April performances by the Joe Goode Performance Group scheduled.

"Artist-run spaces are absolutely primary," says the L.A.-based performer Rachel Rosenthal, an eight-time Sushi veteran. "They were the first spaces that were home, long before performance artists were 'accredited' by others and before it became fashionable to have something called 'new genres.' Sushi was there. And I can tell you, there weren't that many, particularly here in California."

Genre-free zone

Though Cafe Cinema is newer and has a commercial aspect in its restaurant business, both it and Sushi presented work that exists in what writer-performer David Antin calls the "genre-free zone." And both have been international in the scope of their programming.

Freely mixing the visual, literary and performing arts, such work crosses social as well as artistic boundaries. It's no accident that such border-crossing art often takes as its subject the geographical border or that it pushes against cultural taboos and limits.

Such artists appeal to audiences of many ages and colors drawn to a

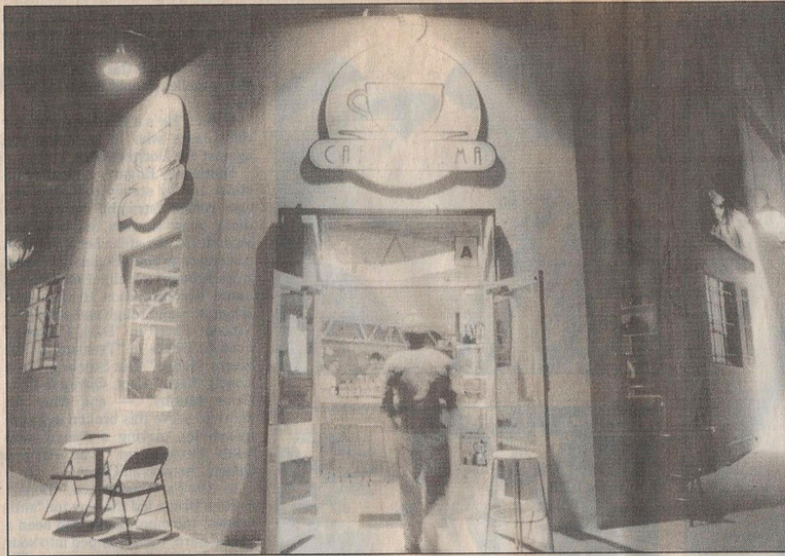


Photo / DANA FISHER

Closed doors: After enlivening a blighted area of downtown for 18 months, Cafe Cinema has closed its doors.



Union-Tribune / JOHN NELSON

Homeless veteran: Artist-producer Lynn Schuette has had to limit and scatter her programming since Sushi Performance and Visual Art was evicted from its Eighth Avenue space last June.

the edge of the culture's tolerance. Ironically, such political responses helped these socially conscious artists publicize their concerns — racism along the border, insensitivity to AIDS, homophobia, the racialized degradation of the envi-

weeks ago. Holzer's light board brought in \$900, and Wegman's limited edition photograph of a costumed Weimaraner brought in

\$1,200.

The festive auction at the Emerald-Shapery Center downtown, with a portion of the bidding going for furniture, design and jewelry, raised about \$20,000, says Sushi general manager Vicki Wolf. She remains upbeat about the institution's survival. She and Schuette have mastered the art of grant-writing, are regularly funded by the Dance, Visual Art and Interarts programs of the National Endowment, and traditionally receive a "superior" rating from the city's Commission for Arts and Culture.

In this economy, those accomplishments haven't translated to more money, however. And the longer Sushi remains homeless, the faster it loses its identity with the public.

Less experienced at grantsmanship, Cafe Cinema is in a different position, applying (and being turned down) for city funds under the umbrella of the nonprofit Foundation for New Literature. It has less access, as well, to the pool of corporate and private money that had already begun shrinking when the space opened.

With Cafe Cinema often jampacked, not for artists who won grants for "multicultural projects" but for a

rainbow of people, Arntenstein and Eberhard have been successful at audience building; they simply require a better lease and a small pot of donated income in order to carry on the programs.

One solution they've considered is to move the Cafe Cinema concept out of San Diego altogether. They've had offers from interested investors in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

But neither of them wants to move north. Arntenstein directed such esteemed, award-winning films as "Break of Dawn" and Gomez-Peña's "Border Brujo," and James Luna's "History of the Luiseño People." A true child of the border, he spent his first 12 years in Tijuana, his teen-age and adult life on the American side, where he and Eberhard now live in a warm and rambling house on Coronado.

Eberhard was eloquent in her assessment of what Cafe Cinema is trying to do within a talk show-culture in which many are babbling but few are saying anything.

"There's an illusion in this cul-

ture that we're speaking to one another when we aren't. We saw communities that really didn't speak to one another come together here. People actually took the time for spiritual nourishment instead of just absorbing the prepackaged culture. That was the greatest reward," she says.

Dread words like "provincial," "bush league" and "sleepy border town" are already buzzing through the depressed financial community. Those words described the arts here before the real estate and the later boom of the early '80s persuaded some that San Diego was on its way to becoming a lively, culturally sophisticated, real city.

Cafe Cinema and Sushi Performance and Visual Art couldn't have happened any place but here, close to Mexico, facing West to Asia, a place where cultures collide but, rather than incinerating each other, can catalyze. Small as they are in their budgets, they're major in heart and in vision. For San Diego to thrive, they should.

"LAUGH OUT LOUD FUNNY AND TOUCHING"

-Jed Craig, SLITTY SECOND PVIEW

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dialogue after a performance would become more heated than the show. Instead of talking about cultural diversity, racial tolerance and social change, these artist-producers lived those values. Both spaces reflected the real, human diversity of the city, not its tourist stop, Chamber of Commerce image.

And most important, as seedbeds for artistic experiment, not just showcases for art products, they supported and nurtured artists, sharing the take with them, giving them bed and board.

Though some of these artists had or went on to make reputations for themselves in the mainstream art world of museums, theaters, even Hollywood, that hasn't been the purpose of the spaces, as Schuette so often insists: "I don't want the public to see us as a farm club for major-league artists. I don't want to become a mainstream theater." But the launching of big careers has been one happy result of her risk-taking.

The other, more significant effect of supporting the new voices: wider awareness of the ferment in American culture.

Sen. Jesse Helms, the Rev. Donald Wildmon and others would never have attacked such artists, former NEA chief John Frohenmeyer would never have rescinded grants unless these performers, first supported by such spaces, had created work that pushed against the taboos of the Reagan-Bush era to

greater the public consciousness, the more possible change becomes.

Creative solutions

In New York where alternative spaces include small artist-run galleries, Artists Space was in financial trouble recently, and Cindy Sherman, who had her first show there, bailed it out by donating artworks that were bought up for \$55,000.

When the performance space Franklin Furnace lost 25 percent of its government funding, its founder sold her collection of artists' books to the Museum of Modern Art, so the Furnace could continue presenting grass-roots artists with new ideas.

Scores of artists performed for no fee when Sushi had a two-week-end-long retrospective celebration to close the Eighth Avenue space. But Whoopi Goldberg and Eric Bogosian haven't sent checks, though they still could. Only a few with financial clout have been generous in giving back to the system that launched them.

Visual artists Jenny Holzer and William Wegman donated works to the annual Sushi Art Auction two

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A COMEDY ABOUT LOVE IN THE '90s.

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