All Yesterday's Parties

When New York's downtown scene was burning

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Like the characters in Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* who memorize books and then become them for posterity, I *am* downtown culture. I live it, I breathe it, remember it, regale people with tales of it. This comes in handy especially with the early '80s scene, not only because that was a magical era, but because many of its stars are no longer around to tell their own stories.

It was time before political correctness and bottled spring water. A time of rule-breaking performance art, which emerged because clubbies, fed up with the safeness of theater, craved a venue for their outrageous convictions. A time when people lived and created on the edge but dreamed of going mainstream. A time when AIDS provided an unwanted extra push toward the precipice. The new scourge loomed hauntingly over the scene, making everyone want to work more and faster, as if dancing under a guillotine. Some unimportant long-ago fling could come back to destroy your chance to be the next big singer, actor or pornographic performance artist. Suddenly, every single night out could be the last. You played hard. You created ever harder.

The line between performance and life blurred as a cross section of artists, socialites and hangers-on celebrated as though it were an art form. They loved "seeing and being seen"-parading around in their makeshift finery but also being a captive audience if the show was intoxicating enough. Ideas, phone numbers and nocturnal drugs (especially Coke and Ecstasy) were exchanged as part of the bohemian networking process. And while some chose celibacy, sex was still rampant, since many people were living in a fearful denial of AIDS or clinging to the hope that it was caused by "other factors." Others began bravely to navigate through safer sex.

Whatever your response to the new disease, a shocking sense of grief and torment began to permeate the downtown scene. By going for broke artistically, you could at least find expressive fulfillment-and there was nothing to lose anyway. It seemed like everyone ever laughed at in high school had flocked to the East Village, where the very traits they had once been ridiculed about became the ones they were now celebrated for. They reinvented themselves as glamorous grotesques in control of their own otherworldliness, coming together in the last-chance saloon of clubland. Drawing on every entertainment genre they could pluck out of their baby-boom consciousness, they spoofed mass culture while embracing it, always with a postmodern affection for anything that would get a rise out of an audience.

The music scene in particular became a stomping ground for many richly talented, self-styled characters. Klaus Nomi, a German singer with black lipstick and a piercing falsettom, innovatively mixed rock and opera, while Hibiscus, in pompadoured hair and glittery bodysuits, sprinkled cartoony drag onto the macho posturing of rock. They were ahead of their time in everything-including, sadly, developing AIDS (at a time when it was called “gay cancer”). John Sex was another tongue-in-cheek amalgam, a stripper-turned-lounge act who brought to the surface all the innuendo bubbling under the archetypal Vegas singer. Performing in clubs from Club 57 to Danceteria, Sex sang his own version of “That’s Life” (“I’ve been a hustler, a hooker, a honcho, a hero, a dyke and a queen”) as he built up a following wild for his raunchy pizzazz. His act was cut short when he developed AIDS and died in 1990.

Towering above them all, literally, was Ethyle Eichelberger, a drag grande dame who-often in productions by Charles Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theater Company-cross-pollinated classical theater with vaudeville techniques and an accordian yet. Ethyl shed new light on diva roles like Medea, Lucretia Borgia and Nefertiti, winking at the audience as he intelligently wreaked havoc on those old chestnuts. In Ludlam’s *The Artificial Jungle*, Ethyl played a woman who, upon learning of her son’s murder, has a highly theatrical stroke, prompting a backflip-typically, a stunt he did without paddling so his moves were completely unencumbered. Alas, Ethyl developed AIDS and in 1990 opened his veins in his bathtub, a suicide that seemed to many the quintessentially classical dramatic act. “It’s just very sad that another diva is gone,” Everett Quinton, Ludlam’s lover who kept the company going after Ludlam died of AIDS in ’87, told me at the time. “It’s numbing. It’s such a common thing now-it’s get up, shit, shower and bury the dead.”

More than anyone else, it was Cookie Mueller who embodied the spirit of the times: She was devastatingly witty but positive, bizarre but accessible. A John Waters film star who wrote the conversationally insightful “Art and About” column in *Details* as well as *The East Village Eye*’s drugs-and-sex-tinged advice column, “Ask Dr. Mueller,” she came off like a slightly witchy girl who always sat alone at the edge of the cafeteria and now was rightly brought to the center, where her thoughts were finally heard and appreciated. Like the best critics of the period, she could demystify art without runining it, and savor success without being mercenary. Cookie had a conscience, as did David Wojnarowicz and Keith Haring, who infused their work with pointed forms of social protest. All were AIDS casualties.

In the late ’80s, that protest increasingly took shape, paving the way for a new era of informed anger, but it didn’t happen overnight. I remember trying to persuade Cookie to come out as a PWA in her column and being surprised when she wouldn’t even consider it. Maybe she rejected the idea because, as someone who loved art that had mystery, she wanted to preserve some of her own. Or perhaps, in the dark ages of AIDS, it would have been *too* edgy.

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