



STEVE SCHNEIDER

Been to Joe's NYC Bar lately? It's this cozy little tavern on West Church Street where the people are friendly and the conversation never lets up. If you've gone looking for it but couldn't find it, don't feel out of the loop: It isn't always there.

Joe's, you see, is not a real watering hole, but a self-contained, interactive-theater environment that arises from the

mists of nothingness every now and again like a dipsomaniac's Brigadoon. It first materialized during last April's Orlando International Fringe Festival, opening its doors to adventurous theatergoers and affording them seven separate chances to hobnob with a gregarious barkeep named Gabriel and his stable of regular customers. (Shhhh! They're actors.) The place is back in business for eight more performance/participation sessions that begin Friday, Dec. 7.

Following a loosely scripted blueprint provided by writer/co-director Christian Kelty — a Brooklyn native and Florida transplant who worked at SAK Comedy Lab for a few years — the denizens of Joe's behave as real bar patrons would: They make small talk, they argue and engage in endless debates on issues like the crucial (the true nature of love) to the trivial (which cartoon characters would be the most fun to sleep with). Audience involvement is actively courted: Cast members routinely call out to strangers like old friends, inviting them to play along by contributing an offhand comment or two. At this bar, if everybody knows your name, it's usually because one of them gave it to you.

The project is a creation of Temenos Ensemble Theater, a troupe of actors and improvisers with a nontraditional approach to drama. Since taking up temporary residency at 300 W. Church St. during Fringe 2001, the group has treated crowds in Pennsylvania and New York state to such productions as *Pinocchio Rex*, a fusion of the *Pinocchio* and *Oedipus Rex* leg-

ends. But a return to Joe's was practically inevitable, Kelty says, particularly in light of the events of Sept. 11. The concept that Joe's is actually located in Manhattan's East Village is one of the few immutables of the franchise; revisiting that environment post-tragedy — at Christmas, yet — was ground too fertile

for Temenos to resist.

"The theme of the show is hope, I think," says Kelty, who also plays Gabriel. And while the eight new, all-different performances — presented under the umbrella title *Joe's NYC Bar: So This is Christmas* — won't exploit the familiar images of the World Trade Center's collapse, we will see how the lives of the bar's clientele have been forever altered.

Responding to audience feedback, Temenos also has made several



PHOTO: GREGG MATTHEWS

Rich man, pour man: Kelty (center) helps the Joe's crowd count its holiday blessings

seeming improvements to the concept. The cast has been reduced from 12 to seven players, and the list of topics to be dealt with "streamlined" to make the performances run a bit shorter. (How many hours do you really want to spend in a "bar" with no bathrooms?) Most important, Kelty has upended the ratio of scripted elements to improv, with the latter now outweighing the former by a

wide margin. Last time, few folk felt comfortable enough to interrupt obviously preordained speeches with their own observations.

Sounds like the friendliest spot in town just got friendlier. No matter what impromptu opinion an attendee offers, Kelty promises, "Some character will agree with your

point of view." Can you say that about every bar you've been to?

Mock tavern has theater on tap; killer comics fire parting shots; art house makes a sound decision

THE GREEN ROOM

Raising the bar

THEATER

Tavern on the evergreen

Involving ensemble pours us another house special

JOE'S NYC BAR

Written by Temenos Ensemble Theater; through Aug. 3; Temenos Ensemble Theater. (407) 246-4590; see *What's Happening* listings

Business as usual" is a foreign language at *Joe's NYC Bar*. Since the experimental-theater environment opened in April 2001, its cast of make-believe barflies has not stopped at the already venturesome idea of leaving room in their semiscrpted chatter for audience interaction. A Christmastime visit to *Joe's* took on the 9/11 tragedy when the subject was still something of a taboo, and there was even a howlingly fun, *Twilight Zone*-ish episode in which a patron was revealed to be the Devil himself.

The current run of the play brings two more risky departures. First, presenter Temenos Ensemble Theater has left the show free of a clearly defined denouement, leaving the windup of each evening's conflicts to the discretion of

the performers and audience. Second, co-founder Christian Kelty has largely removed his barkeep character, Gabriel, from the action, in order to concentrate on directorial duties.

As the play opens, Gabriel is embarking on vacation, leaving the bar in the hands of his two subordinates: Vegas (Eddie Wilder), a part-time actor proud of his role as "Junkie No. 2" on *Law & Order*; and Ivan (John Connon) a Russian-born barback and Elvis fanatic. Their assumption of command coincides with the taping at *Joe's* of *Opposites Attract*, a reality-TV show that's about to pair bar regular/botanist Leonard (Chris Prueitt) with a delicate flower named – but of course – Lilly (Lynda Wilkerson). As overseen by videographer Rob Reid (Tony Lopez, who played a cuddly Mafioso in a previous *Joe's* outing), the arranged hook-up is anything but simple. Everybody (and that means you, too, if you're game) has something to say about the Leonard/Lilly coupling and what it means to society. Among those offering opinions are Madolyn (Jeannette Coleman), a loudly keening widow, and Roger (Shawn Ull), the bouncer – or, as he prefers, "man at the door" – who periodically pipes up with nuggets of questionable wisdom.

Though Wilder and Connon make energetic and likable toastmasters, they don't completely compensate for the absence of Kelty, who, like the best real-life bartenders, allows his

customers the illusion of a control that actually remains his at every second. But this *Joe's* has two dramatic land mines beneath its surface: Agent Cunningham (Ellen Flint), an FBI profiler who picks her moment to lay waste to the room with insult-comedy observations that would do Don Rickles proud; and Ernest

(Aaron Wiederspahn), a scruffy pessimist whose disdain for reality TV bespeaks a graver *weltschmerz*. Wiederspahn is one of the most conscientious actors in town, and although his role is light on dialogue, his reactions betray a commitment so deep and consistent that you may have trouble focusing on anyone else.

If you want to hear more from Ernest, you can always engage him in the discourse that is the show's raison d'être. Don't be deterred that Temenos has not yet attained a seamless integration of its extemporaneous and scripted elements: Danger gives the play some of its lift. At a recent performance, an audience member unknowingly tried to prod Flint into making a crucial speech she was due to deliver much later. Caught off guard at first, she recovered the upper hand by shooting him a well-placed look that sufficed as a response, yet preserved the plot.

Involvement at any cost is what makes the show transcendent entertainment, and this episode wields that potential like a saber. Once you've seen an emotionally captivated audience member spontaneously counsel a character through a dark night of the soul, you emerge with a new awareness of the feats that theater can accomplish. Even a slow night at *Joe's* sees the fourth wall disappear; on a good night, the other three are down before you know what's happened.

— Steve Schneider



Vegas odds: Wilder hosts a blind-date crapshoot

PHOTO: WHEAT WURTZBERGER

Calendar

Orlando Sentinel
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WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 2001



Tyler
GRAY
WHATEVER

'Joe's' attracts a wild bunch of characters

Minutes before the doors open to *Joe's NYC Bar*, a drunken businessman who looks as if he's on day five of a three-day bender comes walking down Hughey Avenue, across Church Street, stumbling and putting his palm toward traffic as he crosses on a "Don't Walk" signal.

Faces of people in line seem to say, "Don't let that guy come over here."

He does. And he goes to work, focusing on ladies. He introduces himself as Richard, staggers around, asks for hugs, sweats and comments on the Christmastime heat. When the doors to *Joe's* swing open, he joins a cast of regulars.

A cast is exactly what they are. There's Leonard, the smart-aleck fixture at the end of the bar. There's Simone, the sexy lady of the evening. There's jolly Nick, artsy Paige, gay Josh, Gabriel your bartender and more. You might meet them for the first time at *Joe's*, but you already know their types.

If you've bought tickets to the show, you know you're going to a play, not a bar. I'm not spoiling the surprise. But you still won't be able to tell some of the actors from the people who just wandered in until about halfway through the play. And you might not know where the bar ends and the set begins. Several folks see regulars with what they think are cocktails and order their own. No can do. *Joe's* is not a real bar. It doesn't have a real bathroom. Facilities are across the street.

Joe's NYC Bar opened during this year's Fringe festival, but it has come back for a limited engagement called "So This Is Christmas." This is your last week to catch the **Temenos Ensemble Theater** show at the transformed building at Hughey Avenue and West Church Street, near I-4. It's the building covered in art and graffiti, all with New York City themes.

Like any bar, *Joe's* features musicians. Thursday, **Itchy Plant** plays. Friday, acoustic artist **Gage** strums you through the show. Saturday, **Throcket Luther** rocks the set. Tickets are \$10 each night.

This is 3-D theater that will pull you in. And I tell you this as someone who rarely gets into live drama in small venues. In fact, I'm planning a return trip. Even without the liquor and beer, *Joe's* has a vibe that rivals any bar in town.

Plus, I kind of miss the new friends I met there. Can you be a regular at a fake bar?

At 'Joe's NYC Bar,' don't just sit there



ROBERTO GONZALEZ/ORLANDO SENTINEL

'Joe's NYC Bar.' Arwen Lowbridge (from left), Christian Kelty, Michelle Kepner, Christopher Prueitt portray characters who frequent the joint.

Joe's NYC Bar, a Fringe Festival show that's now a Church Street institution, is an evening of interactive theater with New York hookers, barflies, mobsters, wannabe-actors and street people.

It's the theatrical equivalent of panning for gold. Every night, the cast mines the audience for comic contributions. You pay your cover charge, have your hand stamped and, as you stand in line, start to interact with the players.

Simone (Michelle Kepner) is a well-scrubbed lady of the night. Beth Marshall is a sweet bag lady with a gift and love for words — she calls herself She. Vegas (Eddie Wilder) is a very funny actor-to-be.

"You're lookin' at the next Junkie No. 2 on *Law & Order!*"

Dante (Tony Lopez) is a hilarious low-rent mobster, Arwen Lowbridge is a nun with a hankerin' for Wild Irish Rose, plus many others.

Gabe (Christian Kelty), the bartender-artistic director, nudges the show in various directions and includes the audience in the discussions.

If there's a knock to *Joe's*, it's that it feels a bit tamer than last year. Maybe it's the pre-digested finale (think *Twilight Zone*). Somehow, there should be a little more danger to this.

Dress as if you'd like to get picked up. Designate a driver, and tip your waitress.

— R.M.



Tyler
GRAY

WHATEVER

Closer to the Fringe

Arwen Lowbridge says her play sort of is and sort of isn't part of the Fringe Festival. She produces *Joe's New York City Bar* — shows at 11 p.m. Friday through Sunday and April 26-28. On April 29, the show is at 5 p.m.

It's at a Bring Your Own Venue, out at 310 W. Church St. Lowbridge and crew are transforming the space into what they say will be a typical East Village, Manhattan, bar. No beer will be served, just soda. Lowbridge said folks will take seats in the place and interact with actors playing regulars in the establishment.

The characters will grow through some pretty heavy emotional arcs, asking your opinion on what they should do all the while. Lowbridge and her Temenos Ensemble Theater company are going for the type of drama-filled night at the watering hole we've all experienced. Picture, say, a wild night at **Knock Knock**.

Even if you like your drama safely tucked away on TV talk shows, you might want to go to check out Throcket Luther, cast as the house band at Joe's.

Orlando's Luther will play a few of their originals and a few covers that Lowbridge says fit in with the show's theme. A play at a bar, set to the tune of Throcket Luther. Color me a drama geek.

The return of Joe

Lots of people missed out on the last run of *Joe's NYC Bar* — that improv theater-bar hybrid that often leaves patrons wondering whether they're making new friends or getting sucked into a plot.

The "bar" has temporarily inhabited the space at 301 W. Church St. for periodic runs. The concept of the show is to seat audience members among characters in a mock bar. Everyone is part of the plot. Usually, folks are moved to participate. It always ends a bit differently.

You'll have another chance to catch a run of the show and a street festival, too, if all goes as planned. Joe's producers and the folks from the Church Street Gallery have a weekend-long art-music-theater festival in the works on West Church.

The plan is to put this thing on Feb. 7-9 with art exhibitions, a band or two, several performances of *Joe's* and more. For now, mark your calendars and watch for updates as the festival gets organized.

JANUARY 21, 2002

APRIL 12, 2001

THEATER

Fringe expedition

The most "fringe" of the Fringe shows I saw was **Joe's NYC Bar**, an interactive, partially improvised comedy/drama that's the sole resident of the Bring Your Own Venue on West Church Street. In this conceptual, site-specific piece, attendees are made to feel as if they're patrons

WHAT: *10th Orlando International Fringe Festival*

WHERE: Multiple downtown stages centered at Heritage Square, 65 E. Central Blvd.

WHEN: Through April 29

COST: Free-\$8; (407) 648-0077

of a Manhattan saloon whose "regulars" may not know your name but are more than willing to give you a new one if it'll spur you into playing along. Think of it as *Tony and Tina's Liver*, but settle in for a long haul: The session I attended clocked in at two hours. Still, the sheer kick of being able to hobnob with the characters - if not alter the course of their intermittent, apparently scripted interactions - makes this *Joe's* a fine place to hang one's hat.

Theater

cool things happen in 'New York City Bar'

There's a little taste of New York down on Church Street through the end of the week. Joe's *New York City Bar* has set up shop in a Bring Your Own Venue space, complete with an annoying homeless guy, an Irish cop, a sassy cross-dresser, an artistic lesbian, a trying-to-break-big house band (Throck-et Luther), a pale and pierced female bouncer (Nina), barfly philosophers and waitresses whose phone numbers you will never, ever get.

It's a concept piece, where paying patrons mix with the Orlando-based cast posing as paying patrons (and employees), rather like *Tony 'n' Tina's Wedding* with less script, fewer set-up gags and jokes. As such, it's a hit-or-miss affair. Maybe your fellow audience members will go along for the ride, or maybe they'll sit and gawk (as I did) and wait for something cool to happen.

A few things do: A little poetry, a few tunes by a tight band, nonalcoholic drinks, pointless barfly arguments about which comic character you'd have sex with, and lots of moments with scary, stunning Nina, either letting you in or making you go get your hand stamped before she'll even THINK about letting you in.

— R.M.