

Villager Theater Guide

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The many faces of Chashama: from top, the space at 217 E. 42nd St., Mink Studio and gallery in Harlem, and the gallery Explosivo/Chashama at 169 Avenue C.

Chashama — creating art where you least expect it

By Raquel Hecker

The block of East 42nd Street between 3rd and 2nd Avenues looks normal enough at first glance. The street is lined with nondescript skyscrapers, stores, and restaurants — exactly what you would expect to see in Midtown — until you pass number 217. Inside the glass storefront aren't clothes or electronics, but performers, who are often as startled to see you as you are to see them. "Saturday night we had two chickens; two gorillas who started pounding on the window; a skunk and a dinosaur," said actor Aimee Ewing, who noticed the premature Halloween revelers last week while performing at 217 in the play "Eden," by Marina Shron. The storefront is one of 12 quirky spaces — from the new Explosivo/Chashama gallery at 169 Avenue C to the Mink Studios and gallery on 126th Street in Harlem — run by Chashama, an arts organization that provides low cost space for artists of many genres to create work, rehearse, and perform.

“I love more interactive shows where [a passer-by] might be someone who goes to a lot of theater, but didn’t expect to see [this kind of show] on 42nd Street,” said Anita Durst, the founder and artistic director of Chashama, “or someone who doesn’t see theater at all.” Durst has brought theater to the streets of New York and other unexpected places for more than 12 years by temporarily moving into vacant business spaces. The lithe, 40-year-old from Westchester started Chashama in honor of the late experimental director Reza Abdoh. When she first met Abdoh in 1990, Durst was an 18-year-old assistant, working on a show performed on the streets of the Meatpacking District (and rehearsed in a meat locker). A site-specific avant-garde theater company, En Garde Arts, run by producer Annie Hamburger, mounted “Father was a Peculiar Man” with a cast of 60. Durst was a high school dropout and aspiring actress, Abdoh was the Iranian-born director and co-writer of an “exhilarating evening of environmental street theater,” as described by The New York Times. “I thought he was amazing the minute I met him,” said Durst. “I thought to myself, ‘I have to work with him.’ ”



She got her chance a year later as a principal member of Abdoh’s experimental theater company Dar a Luz. Abdoh and Durst worked together creating large-scale shows that were exuberant, shocking, and diverting despite dark imagery, until Abdoh’s death in 1995 from AIDS. Because of his early death — he was 32 — Durst felt compelled to carry on his energy, so she rounded up the founders of Dar a Luz, recruited 30 more performers, and convinced them to start Chashama. The name (pronounced Sha-sha-ma) has a few interpretations. In Farsi, Abdoh’s native language, Chashama means “of the eye” or “from the eye.” The Arabic translation is “shame.” “I liked that,” Durst said, “Oooh Theater of Shame.”

“Jr. Black’s Office,” Chasham’s first show, in 1995, was staged in 27 separate second-story office windows of 40 Worth Street in the financial district. “It was a multimedia extravaganza,” said Marc Dale, now Chashama’s Associate Artistic Director. They broadcast the performers’ voices via a pirate radio station to boom boxes on the street below. “I think we caused a couple of accidents because we were cavorting around in there so much,” said Dale.

The building, like many of Durst’s spaces, is owned by her family. Her great-grandfather, an immigrant who arrived in New York at the turn of the century with \$3 sewn into the lining of his coat, started a real estate firm that eventually his sons took over. One of those sons was Seymour Durst, who became a real estate icon amassing large amounts of property in midtown. His son Douglas, Anita’s father, continued the family business, eventually developing the Condé Nast Building. As it was being built in 1997, a modern dancer in Chashama’s P-358 festival (now the annual Oasis Festival) performed a dance piece at 135 West 42nd Street, practically in the Condé Nast construction site. Hard hats were required for rooftop rehearsals.

A decade and thousands of shows later, Durst flits around the kitchen of her Midtown penthouse in yellow socks, cooking dinner for her fiancé, Rick Kariolic, their 2-year-old son Victor, and her sister-in-law. Durst is a tall, attractive brunette in leggings and an oversized t-shirt. But when Kariolic first laid eyes on her in the winter of 2002, he said, “I thought she was homeless.” Durst, who was wearing paint filled, ragged clothes “kind of looked like a bag lady,” said Kariolic. He had just stumbled into a rehearsal of “47 Ninja Clowns” which Durst was performing in, but she wasn’t wearing a costume. “It’s just the way I dress,” she deadpanned. Ironically, Durst was the heir to a real estate mogul who owned the space they were standing in, while Rick was actually homeless when they first met, at least for the week. He was just visiting from Chicago to start his modeling career and was living out of his car. He was taken with what he described as “a big playground for artists of any medium,” and soon became one of the Ninja Clowns, a group known for riding the subway en masse wearing red noses, and hugging strangers on the street. “That one got mixed reviews,” said Durst.

Today Chashama is a very organized playground. While film, visual art, and performance aren’t allotted the same amount of space at any given time, each procured accommodation is carefully considered as to what type of art it should host. Sayeeda Clarke, the film programming director, chooses movies to be rehearsed and shot in the 20,000-square-foot warehouse on 12th Avenue at 57th Street and Mink Studios in Harlem. Jenny Rogers curates visual art for the gallery on 44th Street in Manhattan, and runs the artists studios at the Brooklyn Army Terminal in Sunset Park. Tracy Candido curates art for the newest Chashama space, Explosivo/Chashama at 169 Avenue C. Suko Presseau chooses artists for the Chashama North residency in bucolic Pine Plains, NY, where visual and performing artists can live and develop work for over a month, and Risa Shoup selects all dance, theater, multidisciplinary projects, and performance art — or as Shoup says, “anything live and breathing in a space” — all of which is presented in Chashama’s window theaters on East 42nd Street and West 37th Street and a studio on West 119th Street.

When Chashama first began, most of the spaces were donated by the Durst family. Now, only a third of Chashama’s spaces belong to the Dursts — the office, the theater/gallery at 44th Street and Chashama North. The rest of the spaces are loaned or rented temporarily at subsidized rates from other real estate developers. The amount of rent varies from space to space, but it’s always, as Shoup says, “from a very charitable state.” After all, she continued, “there’s nothing good about vacant space.”

Last week, during the final performance of “Eden,” four energetic young performers were crowding up the stage in the window of 217. In true Pirandello style, actors Aimee Ewing and Roger Lirtsman played performers in rehearsal for an unscripted romantic play that takes place in a window. “I fell in love with this window,” explains playwright Marina Shron. “This piece was written to some extent with this space in mind.” The actors interact with the audience throughout the play, but only the audience on other side of the window - not the audience who paid \$15 to watch. The passersby — two tourists who watched open-mouthed, a woman who waved at the actors, shrugged, then took a bow, and the bewildered businessmen and women who rushed by — became actors by default. These unintentional performers, and the two actors planted outside on the street for most of the show, kept the play alive by adding dimension to the claustrophobic, contentious relationship between Ewing and Lirtsman’s characters.

The West 37th Street window theater will soon host performance artist Andrew Gilchrist's "Musings of a Man-Bird Recluse." As former Admiral Robert Pelican — who is half-man, half-pelican — Gilchrist will create a different performance every night of the week of November 12th that will culminate in a 24-hour performance on Friday, November 16th. Every three hours, Gilchrist will perform a one-hour show promising: singing, guessing games, psychic readings, magic, comedy, inordinate suffering, and violent humility.

Durst is humble, almost violently so, about her role in Chashama, which has afforded many artists the opportunity to perform and experiment, including the actor Rip Torn and his son Tony Torn, the seminal experimental theater group The Living Theater, acclaimed conceptual artist and choreographer Julie Atlas Muz, the National Theater of the United States of America, and performance artist Tammy Ben-Tor. "Everyone else made [Chashama]," says Durst, "I was just able to allow it to happen because of my access to real estate." As for the future, Durst is particularly excited about the upcoming residency program, where artists develop their work on a farm in Pine Plains, New York and Chashama's new film program. She eventually hopes to expand her eight person staff in order to support more artists and start nationwide programming, and become better known by more people in the real estate community, "so if someone has an empty space they think of us." But overall, Durst is very pleased with how far the company has come in ten years. "I never envisioned it to be like this," said Durst, "but it's greater than any expectation I had."