

The Artist in His Studios

By Jane Heil Usyk

My husband, Michael Usyk, an artist, has had three studios in his life, not counting the one he has at home now in a corner of our living room, which he describes as “two-hundred square inches.” It’s only good for small pictures, and that limits the artist.

His first studio was his teacher’s. It was the early ‘90s, and he woke up one morning and said, “I’ve got to learn to weld.” Up to then he’d been a videographer. So he found an artist in metals on West 14th Street and 9th Avenue, where the Apple store is now, and started spending all his free time there. The teacher was a good welder but not a very good artist. Very quickly Michael learned the basics of welding, and it was artwork all the way, after that. He picked up



IN SEARCH OF STUDIO SPACE: Michael Usyk at his “200-square-inch” studio at home. Photo by Jane Heil Usyk.

the scraps his teacher let fall to the floor and made wonderful pieces (using mostly nega-

tive space) with them.

He also learned how to color steel, making a toxic, strange brew. He developed a palette of interesting colors, unlike the blacks and reds of his teacher.

That lasted until one day when an art consultant brought a client to the studio to look at sculptures to buy for her lawn. The teacher had 20 large pieces and a piece of Michael’s that he, Michael, had pushed into a corner. They were underwhelmed, except for the piece in the corner. They said, “Do you have any more like this, only larger?” The next day the teacher carelessly hung a rag on a very delicate part of one of Michael’s sculptures. Michael knew he had to leave. He also knew that welding was a very expensive proposition, requiring cement floors, high ceilings, an oxyacetylene weld, a torch, a bandsaw, a grinder, and a buzz box, or electric welder. There needed to be room for flames to shoot out. It would cost at least \$4,000. Maybe he should go into an easier branch of art. He switched to painting.

But it was such a comfortable arrangement. The teacher’s studio was right around the corner from Plymouth Beef; Michael had his own keys to the freezer there. So on any hot day, he could take a break from the very hot work, go downstairs and into the meat room and cool off with the animals.

He looked around West 14th Street, which at the time (the 1990s) was a worn-out, ratty gathering place for artists, butchers, and gay cross-dressers, plus a few homeless people and gallerists, and young folk who danced in the clubs there. He liked what he saw, and he especially liked the very large studio of a young artist who had recently graduated

from RISD, Tom Beckman. But on his own, Michael could only afford a hundred square feet. So a very small area of Beckman’s Studio was his alone, but he could wander the rest of the studio at will.

The studio was on the ground floor of 416 West 14th Street, between 9th Avenue and Washington Street. It worked well for several years. His neighbors—Matthew Barney, John Currin, Bill Jensen, Jeff Mace, about a dozen wonderful artists—all got along famously, meeting each other waiting for the paint to dry and having a smoke outside on the sidewalk.

Andrew Crispo came through now and then. A friend of Michael’s said about Crispo, “He may be nuts, and kill the occasional person, but he has a great eye.” He was very nice to Michael.

They all went to Florent and mixed with the club kids having drinks and meals. Florent loved them and they loved him. Everything was perfect.

Then Stella McCartney bought the building. Diane von Furstenberg bought the building on the corner. The last of the butchers in the neighborhood sold out to other designers and went to Florida or Italy. Tom Beckman went to Gowanus. Michael had to move again. He wanted to stay in Manhattan and remain within walking distance of our apartment, because walking to work stimulated his imagination.

He finally found a windowless room at 195 Chrystie Street, which in the ‘80s had been known mainly for hookers. The room had been, up to then, a large broom closet. He set up a studio in the building, which, thankfully, had mostly artists in it. He made friends with Margaret, the very small, beautiful woman at the end of his floor; she did very small, precise, and perfect paintings

of floating dresses, landscapes and other natural things like flowers and vegetables and plants. She was from the plains of Nebraska—an expert in Renaissance panel painting. She was the Senior Lecturer at the Whitney Museum. They were friends and neighbors and mutual supporters and admirers of each other’s work for five years, and then one day a backhoe dug a hole next to her window, and the New Museum started going up, and all the prices went up, too.

A branch of Con Ed moved in across the hall from Michael, and all the artists moved out. Michael learned recently that his old studio, which had been 250 square feet and \$500 a month, was now \$2,500 a month. It still had no windows. Michael looked around, but there weren’t any affordable studios left in Manhattan, let alone within walking distance of the apartment.

So he went home and gave up the idea of having a studio and making large paintings in it. Now his efforts all go into little 5” x 7” and 10” x 12” pictures, lots of them. Hundreds, I think.

The biggest painting he can make in his new digs is 14” x 18”. The Mona Lisa, he tells me, is just a little bit larger.

Jane Heil Usyk has written about a hundred magazine articles in magazines such as Vogue, Cosmo, Glamour, Family Circle, Playgirl, Fitness, the Villager and the West-View News. She also wrote a book, Silence, Storytelling, and Madness: Strategies of Resistance in Nuyorican and Other Latina Women’s Coming-of-Age Stories, which was published in 2013. She was an editor of Fitness Magazine, and an editorial assistant at Vogue. She has taught at Touro College and the University of New Haven. Michael’s web site is at www.Michaelusyk.com

Celebrating the Legacy of Joe Cino’s Legendary Caffè Cino Coffee House Theater

By Robert Heide

On Sunday, April 22nd at 6 p.m., 50 years after the closing of the legendary coffee house theater Caffè Cino on Cornelia Street in Greenwich Village, now officially considered the first off Broadway theater, a panel convened, moderated by theatre critic, Charles Isherwood. The panel consisted of mostly playwrights who had worked there and took place at the Cornelia Street Café’s downstairs stage-entertainment barroom run by the indefatigable Robin Hirsch, the Café’s master of ceremonies. They included John Guare, whose distinguished career began in the tiny Caffè Cino and who went on to write the plays *Six Degrees of Separation*, *House of Blue Leaves*, the hit musical, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and the screenplay for the blockbuster Louis Malle film, *Atlantic City* starring Burt Lancaster and Susan Sarandon; Jean Claude van Itallie, author of *War and America Hurrah*; myself—author of the just published *Robert Heide 25 Plays*—who wrote two plays, *The Bed* and *Moon* for the Cino; Magic Dominic, curator of the



THE APRIL PANEL WAS THE LAUNCH EVENT OF A NEW ANNUAL FESTIVAL HONORING THE HISTORY AND HERITAGE OF GREENWICH VILLAGE: (left to right) Cino panel moderator theatre critic Charles Isherwood, actor/writer John Gilman, playwrights John Guare, Robert Heide, Jean Claude van Itallie, curator Magic Dominic. Photo by Ron Lieberman.

Caffè Cino collection at the Library of the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center (there Magic oversees the vast ‘glittering’ collection of Cino memorabilia including original scripts and posters); and my partner John Gilman, who was first cast as Christopher in my play *Moon* in 1967.

In the audience was Linda Eskenas, who performed in *Moon* also (and later with Gilman in my play *At War With the Mongols*) and the William M. Hoffman plays *Good Night I love You* and *Saturday Night at the Movies at the Cino* and was the muse and star of H. M. Koutoukas’s play *Medea in the*

Laundromat; Koutoukas who died ten years ago and was called the quintessential Cino playwright, received an Obie Award for “his outrageous assault on the theater.” Also in the audience was actress Marilyn Roberts who starred in my play at La Mama *Why Tuesday Never Has a Blue Monday*, the owners of the Washington Square Hotel, Judy Paul and Marc Garrett, major supporters of the sponsors of the event—The Village Trip (more later); Casey Childs and Sally Plass of Primary Stages, Janet Coleman of WBAI ‘Cat Radio’ and myriad others.

The Cino first opened its doors in 1958 at a storefront on MacDougal Street next to the Provincetown Theater where, in the same year, Edward Albee’s one-act play *The Zoo Story* first opened on a bill with Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape*. Suddenly one-act plays in coffee shop theater spots were the rage. Later Joe moved to 31 Cornelia Street to enjoy a ten year run. In the first years he put on the short works of Genet, Tennessee Williams, William Inge, Oscar Wilde, Sartre, Thornton Wilder, J. D. Salinger, Noel Coward, Andre Gide, Chekhov, Cocteau,

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