

November 4, 2020

Hon. Sarah Carroll, Chair
NYC Landmarks Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10007

Re: Request for Evaluation for 50 West 13th Street, Manhattan

I write to urge consideration of 50 West 13th Street for designation as an individual New York City landmark. With the recent and unfortunate passing of Edith O'Hara, owner of the 13th Street Repertory Company which occupies the building, the future of this 19th century row house is now in grave doubt. This house is not only an unusual relic of early 19th century New York with rare intact architectural detail, it is an important piece of New York's theatrical and cultural history.

Originally built as a Greek Revival row house c. 1846-47, 50 West 13th Street retains its original form with three stories, three bays, exposed basement, and front stoop. It also retains some interesting features on its facade including incised ogee arches at the window lintels, a bracketed metal cornice at the roof, parlor floor windows, and an intricate cast iron portico with a hipped metal hood. While it was first built to house a single family, as was typical with row houses in this neighborhood and others in New York City, it was later subdivided to house multiple families.

There is also apparently a hidden passageway in the basement of the building which oft-repeated lore describes as connected to the Underground Railroad. While this explanation is more than likely not accurate, it could be, and could indicate use of the building as a speakeasy during Prohibition. In either case, it warrants further research and examination.

Other alterations to the house date to 1899, when a permit was issued to construct a shed between the front and rear house. At that time the address was occupied by F.J. Newcomb Manufacturing Company, which made picture frames and moldings. Newcomb's main manufacturing location was next door at No. 42-44 West 13th Street. Subsequent permits show that Newcomb occupied No. 50 at least through 1927.



EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Andrew Berman

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

PRESIDENT

Arthur Levin

VICE PRESIDENT

Trevor Stewart

VICE PRESIDENT

Kyung Choi Bordes

SECRETARY / TREASURER

Allan G. Sperling

TRUSTEES

Mary Ann Arisman

Tom Birchard

Blaine Dunham Birchby

Richard Blodgett

Jessica Davis

David Hottenroth

Anita Isola

Jeanne M. Krier

John Lamb

Justine Leguizamo

Leslie S. Mason

Ruth McCoy

Katherine Schoonover

Marilyn Sobel

Judith Stonehill

Naomi Usher

Linda Yowell

F. Anthony Zunino III

232 EAST 11TH STREET

NEW YORK NY 10003

212 475-9585

WWW.GVSHP.ORG

In 1958, No. 50 West 13th Street was altered from a store/manufactory to a theater in the basement and first floor (the second and third floors housed apartments). The



theater company which first called 50 West 13th Street home was the Washington Players Studio, which was formed at the beginning of

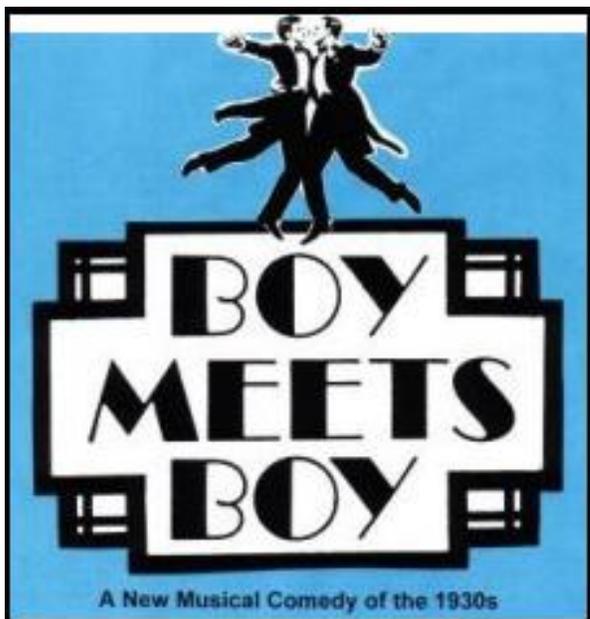
what would be coined in 1960 by *The Villager* as the Off-Off-Broadway movement. In addition to its monthly plays, the group also offered acting classes. Newspaper ads show that the building continued operating as a theater in the 1960s, hosting the Afro-American Folkloric Troupe, which presented poetry, prose and folklore, in 1968.

In 1972, the 13th Street Repertory Company was founded by Edith O'Hara at 50 West 13th Street, which remained there under O'Hara's operation until her recent passing. O'Hara was known for championing up-and-coming artists, and allowed actors and writers to explore and create in an uninhibited atmosphere. Some of the then-unknowns who

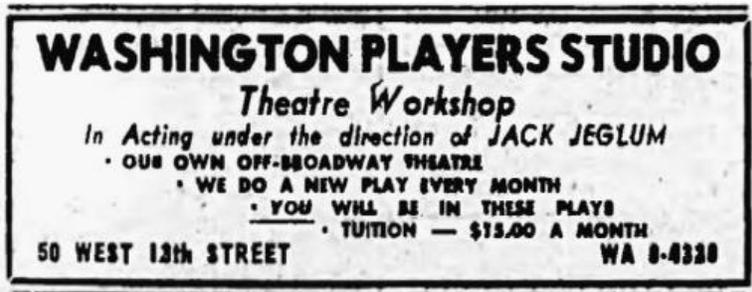


50 West 13th Street, 1940s tax photo

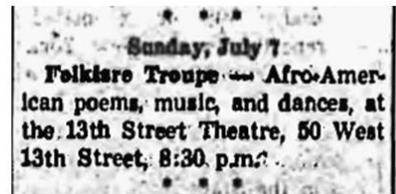
graced the stage of the 13th Street Repertory Theater included Bette Midler, Barry Manilow, Chazz Palminteri, Amy Stiller, Jamie DeRoy, Richard Dreyfus, and Christopher Meloni. Brother Theodore, monologist and Greenwich Village icon, made the 13th Street Repertory Theater his base for 17 years.



O'Hara helped develop the musical "Touch," for which the theater and its cast album received Grammy nominations. In 1974, she also presented



Folklore Troupe
 The Afro-American Folkloric Troupe, four young Negroes performing poetry, prose and folklore, are appearing every Sunday at 8:30 p.m. at 50 West 13th Street. The troupe was formed four years ago in San Francisco, and has toured coast-to-coast.



New York's first hit gay musical, "Boy Meets Boy" by Bill Solly. Solly had approached other producers in New York and London but was met with resistance as they were not willing to take a gamble on a gay musical. With O'Hara, however, he was given that chance.

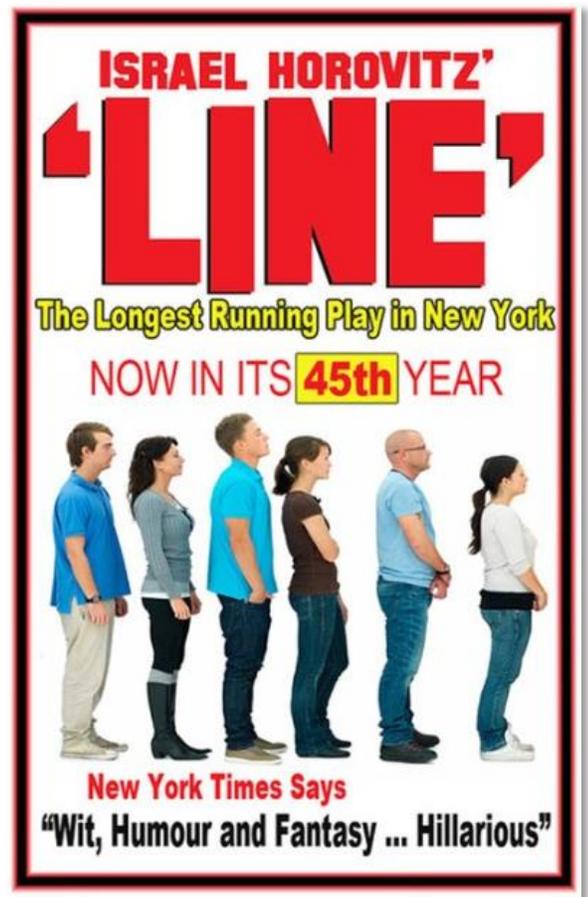
Israel Horovitz's play "Line," which has now been produced in 120 countries, was originally directed at the theater by O'Hara herself, and is the longest-running production in New York City. When O'Hara presented one of Tennessee Williams' plays at her theater, Williams proclaimed from her stage that the future of theater in America was not in big Broadway theaters, but in small, independent houses such as the 13th Street Repertory. Following Williams' death, O'Hara gave his play, "Pieces of Paradise" its New York premier, and in 2006 the Repertory presented four Tennessee Williams plays which at that time had been recently discovered in an archive in Texas. Edith O'Hara has received commendations for her work at 13th Street Repertory Company from Mayor Michael Bloomberg, Governor Andrew Cuomo, and First Lady Michelle Obama and President Barack Obama.

Having housed Off-Off-Broadway theater groups since 1958, 50 West 13th Street contains one of the oldest continuously operating Off-Off-Broadway theaters in New York City. It stands among other such groundbreaking and experimental theaters below 14th Street as La MaMa, Café Cino, and



Judson Poets' Theatre.

These theaters typically operated on shoe-string budgets, encouraging writers and actors to push the boundaries of their craft and were therefore at the forefront of





Edith O'Hara in front of 50 West 13th Street

innovation in American theater, giving voice to artists, communities, and perspectives which would otherwise never make it to the stage or proverbial public square.

No. 50 West 13th Street is both a significant architectural vestige of 19th century row house development in Manhattan and an important piece of New York's theatrical and cultural history. With the fate of the building now uncertain, I strongly urge you to expeditiously consider 50 West 13th Street for landmark designation, while there remains an opportunity to do so.

Sincerely,

Andrew Berman
Executive Director

cc: Borough President Gale Brewer
City Council Speaker Corey Johnson
Senator Brad Hoylman
Assemblymember Deborah Glick
Community Board 2, Manhattan
Historic Districts Council
NY Landmarks Conservancy