

THE PYRAMID CLUB

By Iris Rose

The Pyramid Club was the brainchild of Bobby Bradley, Alan Mace and Victor Sapienza, employees of mainstream nightclub Interferon. In December 1981, they approached a man known to them only as Richie about throwing a party in the largely unused back room of the bar at 101 Avenue A. It was a resounding success due to a combination of factors: a fun crowd of hip people, good music, short performances that interrupted the dancing, and dancers on the bar in unusually ambiguous drag, self-consciously playing with the idea of gender. The party's success led to more events, and soon Richie suggested that Bradley and friends expand to a daily schedule.

Soon after that, Brian Butterick was hired as "security", but within a month he became Bradley's assistant, booking bands on Black Tuesdays, devoted to alternative music. Each night of the week acquired its own personality and crowd. Sundays had Cafe Iguana, an evening of off-beat cabaret acts; Thursdays were "Theme Parks," total-club events in which the audience was surrounded by an environmental performance; Mondays were for theatrical events; and Fridays and Saturdays, popular bands performed, but with unusual opening acts.

From June 1982 to June 1983, Monday nights were devoted to John Jesurun's weekly serial, *Chang in a Void Moon*. Unable to acquire the money for his next film, sculptor and filmmaker Jesurun approached Bradley about the possibility of doing a weekly serial. Bradley was immediately supportive despite Jesurun's lack of theatre experience. The small audience for the first episode was appreciative, but the Pyramid staff was enthusiastic. According to Jesurun, Bradley was the first person ever to praise his writing skill. The cast originally was comprised mostly of friends who had appeared in Jesurun's films, but later included Steve Buscemi, Mark Boone, Jr., Anna Kohler, Frank Maya, John Kelly, and for a brief time, Ethyl Eichelberger, playing a man. *Chang* received critical attention, not only in *The Village Voice* and *The East Village Eye*, but in theatre publications like *The Drama Review*. Originally intended to run for nine weeks, *Chang* ultimately ran for a year. This was followed by a European tour of selected episodes, after which Jesurun began to direct full-length shows at La MaMa and the Performing Garage.

The only cast member Bradley had suggested for *Chang*, John Kelly, was one of the bar dancers on Pyramid's first night. Kelly was an integral part of the Pyramid family, appearing in countless shows. But in contrast to the wild energy of most acts at the Pyramid, Kelly's solo performances were notable for their quiet intensity. Dressed in elegant and tasteful drag, Kelly would lip-synch Maria Callas arias, with enormous stage presence and skillful execution. Over time Kelly acquired the confidence actually to sing the arias himself, in an eerie countertenor voice that became his trademark and the foundation of his later success.

Even more than Kelly, the greatest inspiration to the Pyramid drag performers was Ethyl Eichelberger. He had previously been a character actor with the Trinity Square Repertory Theatre and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company. Eichelberger, who had his first name legally changed to Ethyl, portrayed great women from history—Nefertiti, Lucretia Borgia, Catherine the Great—using outrageous costumes, original songs (accompanying himself on the accordian), and manically-paced monologues peppered with anachronistic jokes and ad libs. The most inspiring things about Eichelberger were his refreshing humility and unflagging energy. He could be seen at all hours, wheeling a shopping cart loaded with props and costumes through the streets of the Lower East Side to his storefront home.

It is difficult to describe the contribution of emcee Ann Craig, yet she was an important part of the club's early appeal. She would introduce an act with such sincerity and enthusiasm that she not only created an atmosphere of expectation for the audience but also a feeling of inspiration among the performers.

The bar dancers became a signature of Pyramid, and they put as much care into the construction of their costumes as did the performers on stage. The Pyramid often had an over-all theme for the evening, and dancers would out-do each other constructing the best Outer Space, Trailer Park, or Civil War outfit.

Although the Pyramid was essentially a gay bar, the crowd at the Pyramid could be astonishingly diverse. Among the more memorable regulars were an Asian dwarf and an elderly man who loved to dance whom many patrons mistook for William Burroughs. And the performers were as diverse

as the crowd. The Pyramid presented a constantly changing vaudeville of unusual acts, ranging from the dehumanized shapes in Disturbed Form Theatre, to the gigantic puppets of Pierre Lamarche, whose flailing limbs nearly filled the space. Most of the successful performances were extreme in some way—in size, volume, intensity, shock value, or just sheer nerve. Stephen Tashjian, who performs under the name Tabboo, punctuated his "patriotic tribute" to America by setting stuffed poodles on fire and throwing them through a hoop.

Theme parties had been a major part of the earlier Club 57, but the Pyramid gave them a new spin. The Theme Park most often cited is "El Cuspidor," a Central American theme night, when radical South American nuns commandeered the deejay booth and demanded that nothing be played but Joan Baez records.

When *Chang* ended its run in June 1983, a number of unusual theatrical productions filled the Monday night slot, most notably Kestutis Nakas' *Titus Andronicus*. When Nakas approached Bradley about doing an extremely bloody yet comic production of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* in serial form, his experience was similar to John Jesurun's—Bradley was unexpectedly enthusiastic. Nakas assembled an "all-star cast" by Pyramid standards: Ann Magnuson, John Kelly, John Sex, Mark Oates, Bill Rice, Steve Buscemi, and Mark Boone, Jr. The series lasted five weeks, one act per week. *Titus Andronicus* earned Nakas not only the respect of the Pyramid staff but also a job teaching at NYU in the Experimental Theatre Wing. Nakas went on to create a variety of Pyramid productions, including a Theme Park with the club decorated as the interior of the human body; and *The Andrew Carnegie Story*, which ended with Nakas, as Carnegie, passing out real money to the crowd.

1984 brought increased media attention, from the *Wall Street Journal*, "Entertainment Tonight", and *People* magazine, among others. This in turn brought larger, but less tolerant, crowds. As a result, Butterick began to book more bands and less performance. Bradley was becoming increasingly detached from the daily management of the club, but increasingly interested in drugs. As time had passed, hard drugs had become a part of the Pyramid scene, with performers in the Theme Parks sometimes paid in cocaine. In 1984, Bradley was ousted by the rest of the staff, though he received

a generous severance payment of \$15,000. Alan Mace, who took over his duties, declared that any staff member caught using hard drugs on the premises would be fired on the spot.

The departure of Bradley spelled the end of Cafe Iguana, the remaining night for eccentric performance acts. Sunday took on a different character with "Whispers," an overtly gay night intended to parody suburban gay discos. The emcee for Whispers was Hapi Phace (Mark Rizzo), an unlikely drag queen, over 6 feet tall with an unusually large face and a deep voice, but with a natural gift of gab. The most successful act to emerge from Whispers was Lypsinka, the creation of John Epperson. Instead of imitating Joan Crawford or Judy Garland, Epperson created a composite of all the standard divas, and more. His performances were always well-rehearsed and executed with flawless timing. Epperson also created two large-scale productions for the Pyramid, *Ballet of the Dolls* and *Dial M for Model*, with big casts of Pyramid favorites. The productions were successful enough to have subsequent runs at La MaMa, which led Epperson toward a very successful career Off-Broadway.

A new group of drag performers appeared on the scene from Atlanta in 1984, among them Lady Bunny, and found a receptive audience at Whispers. On Labor Day 1985, Lady Bunny organized and hosted the Wigstock Festival in Tompkins Square Park, which drew approximately 500 people and included John Kelly singing "Woodstock" as Joni Mitchell. Wigstock later moved to the Christopher St. piers, where, at its peak in 1995, it attracted a crowd of 50,000.

By the second half of the 1980's, the Pyramid was no longer a laboratory for experimental performance, and by 1989, even its gay component was in jeopardy. At one point Hapi Phace found himself managing the club on Sunday nights after all the rest of the original staff had left or been fired. The heyday of the Pyramid was over. "It became a place where things had happened," says Phace, "not where we were helping to make it happen."