

The Caffè Cino

31 Cornelia Street, Manhattan
Tax Map Block 590 Lot 47

Built: 1877

Builder: Benjamin Warner

Style: Italianate

Proposed Action: Propose for Calendaring May 14, 2019



The building at 31 Cornelia Street, situated between Bleecker and West 4th streets in Manhattan, is culturally significant for its association with the Caffe Cino, which occupied the building's commercial space from 1958 to 1968. The coffee shop served as a theater venue, becoming the birthplace of Off-Off-Broadway and New York City's first gay theater. The 4-story, brick, tenement and store building was constructed by Benjamin Warner in 1877 for Michael Maloney and has a stone foundation and Philadelphia brick walls, with cast iron and wood storefront elements. Designed in a modest Italianate style, the building is located within the city's Greenwich Village Historic District Extension II, which was designated in 2010.

Joe Cino, an Italian-American gay man, opened the Caffe Cino in 1958 as a coffee shop and art exhibition space. Soon, the cafe was also used for poetry readings and small, experimental theater productions. The Caffe Cino emerged as a venue for new and unknown playwrights, most of whom were gay men. At this time, portraying homosexuality in theatrical productions was illegal and the Caffe Cino became a center for gay artists to share their work. Many of these projects overtly depicted homosexual themes on stage for the first time. The venue established the Off-Off-Broadway scene, freed from the usual constraints of Broadway and Off-Broadway projects that were required to adhere to specific financial structures and more conventional narrative subjects. Performances at the Caffe Cino were produced on a tight budget and were unusually cheap to attend: all that was required was a one dollar purchase at the cafe.

Playwrights and performers who presented their work at the Caffe Cino pioneered the Off-Off-Broadway, experimental, and gay theater movements. Theater at the Cino consistently acknowledged the existence and experiences of gay people, without the prevailing homophobic stereotypes. While the Cino legitimized the value of experimental theater in its own right, many artists who started there also experienced success later with Off-Broadway or Broadway productions. Tom Eyen, who wrote the Broadway hit *Dreamgirls* in 1981 for which he won a Tony, John Guare, author of *Six Degrees of Separation*, Sam Shepard, actor and playwright who won a Pulitzer in 1979 for his play *Buried Child*, and Lanford Wilson, who wrote the Broadway hit *Fifth of July*, are a few of the many significant playwrights that got their start at the Caffe Cino.

The Caffe Cino closed in 1968 after Joe Cino's tragic suicide. Even before the 1969 Stonewall riots, the cafe provided a safe and nurturing space for gay artists to congregate, stage their work, and openly portray narratives and themes significant to the gay community. The building retains a high degree of integrity to the period associated with the Caffe Cino.



Tax Photo, c. 1939 (top);
The Caffe Cino by Brian Merlis, c.
1962, LGBT Historic Sites Project
(above)

