



*Testimony in Support of the Proposed Designation of the
Caffe Cino, 31 Cornelia Street, Manhattan,
as a New York City Landmark*

Tuesday, June 4, 2019

My name is Amanda Davis and I am the project manager of the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, a cultural heritage initiative founded by historic preservationists in 2015 to document historic places connected to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community in the city's five boroughs.

The Project strongly supports the designation of the Caffe Cino as a New York City Landmark. In 2017, on behalf of the Project, I authored the National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Cino, which operated from 1958 to 1968. In it, I noted the Cino's significance as the first venue of importance to continuously stage Off-Off-Broadway theater, then a newly-emerging movement, and for its role in the development of gay theater and its support of gay playwrights, at a time when depicting homosexuality on stage was illegal. While the Cino attracted the attention of established theater professionals and artists, it was first and foremost a home for unknown theater talent to hone their skills and write about works of their choosing without censorship. From the Caffe Cino, came Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award winners, founders of influential theater companies, and many others whose achievements are included in the National Register nomination.

The Cino is also a testament to the arts as a powerful force for social change and self empowerment, as it was the first venue to regularly perform plays by and about gay men in what was still an incredibly repressed and homophobic era. The space impacted gay audience members as well, far beyond the walls of the Cino. For the first time in New York, and perhaps in the country, LGBT people -- on a year-round basis and in one centrally located space -- regularly saw depictions of themselves in a more multi-dimensional and realistic light, thus contrasting the negative stereotypes that had permeated mainstream theater and film for most of the 20th century. Operating in the years before the 1969 Stonewall uprising, the Cino was also a crucial safe space for gay theater artists. It allowed them to live openly, to feel welcome to write about, direct, and perform in plays with gay subject matter, and to see their work staged in front of mostly receptive audiences at a time when this combination of factors was rare. As Cino veteran and Tony-nominated playwright William M. Hoffman so poignantly recalled, "I never would have been a playwright without the Caffe Cino. I never certainly would have written about gay subjects that freely. That was the kind of empowerment that the place gave us. We were no longer victims."

The Project asks that the Commission build off its National Register listing and designate the Caffe Cino a New York City Landmark.