

The New York Times
Arts & Leisure

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, JUNE 19, 2005

THEATER

From Very Private Schools to Very Public Stages

The founders of Women's Expressive Theater just love to play against type.

Beth Schneckenberger



Beth Schneckenberger

From left, Danielle Skraastad, Mia Barron and Maggie Lacey, the three actress-playwrights of "Big Times," now showing in TriBeCa. The musical play is a production of Women's Expressive Theater.

By ADA CALHOUN

AFTER a muggy morning spent in last-minute rehearsal for their new play, "Big Times," a tribute to vaudeville, the play's three actresses fled to the cool, brick-walled dressing room of Walkerspace in TriBeCa. They threw off their old-time costumes, shimmied into light summer outfits and pulled sandwiches out of bags. Instantly, the cluttered offstage space assumed the atmosphere of a slumber party.

The three actress-playwrights — Maggie Lacey, Mia Barron and Danielle Skraastad — were soon joined by the show's director, Leigh Silverman; its producers, Sasha Eden and Victoria Pettibone; and its co-producer, Marla Ratner. The giddiness level climbed.

"The play is about friendship and refusing to suffer," Ms. Barron said, "but it's also a ribald entertainment."

"Did you just say 'rye bread entertainment'?" asked Ms. Silverman.

"Rye bread!" the women began chanting.

"Big Times," which opened on Saturday, is the latest production from the on-the-rise company Women's Expressive Theater (primarily known as WET). Founded in 1999 by Ms. Eden, 31, and Ms. Pettibone, 30, WET is known in the low-budget theater world for its unusual combination of glamorous fund-raising parties and old-school feminist politics. WET's mission statement is teeming with words like "empower," "sisterhood" and "women-centric," but WET's parties hardly feel like political action meetings; the drinks are strong and the guest lists elite, with attendees like Billy Crudup, Amy Sedaris, Paul Rudd and Ally Sheedy.

"We're putting the sparkle back in feminism," Ms. Eden said.

Ms. Eden and Ms. Pettibone, Upper East Side natives, met at an interschool singing group. (Ms. Pettibone attended Brearley, and Ms. Eden attended Chapin.) They became friends and began meeting once a week before school for iced coffee.

"Even then we were having power breakfasts," Ms. Eden said.

Ms. Pettibone added, "Except back then, our meeting agenda was boys and skiing." The women lost touch but reunited after college; Ms. Pettibone was Anna Deavere Smith's assistant, and Ms. Eden was the office manager of Bernard

Telsey Casting, which was casting Ms. Smith's "House Arrest."

Though successful, Ms. Eden and Ms. Pettibone discovered a mutual frustration with the way women (themselves included) were treated in the acting world.

"I'm the brunette and I look ethnic, so I'm not going to be the ingénue," Ms. Eden said. "One of my best friends is a beautiful blonde, and she never gets to play anyone intelligent. We were following our dreams and making things happen, but something didn't feel right."

Sexism, she said, "has just been swept under the carpet." She cited a New York State Council on the Arts report that only 17 percent of the plays produced in the 2001-2 season were written by women. "We decided we should just produce the kind of work we're not seeing out there," Ms. Pettibone said. "It's not about teaching the world a lesson. It's about producing media that we love."

WET's first show was "I Stand Before You Naked" by Joyce Carol Oates, which appeared at the 1999 New York International Fringe Festival. Ms. Oates saw the show and wrote additional material for WET that became "I Stand Before You Naked II." In 2002, the company staged Sheila Callaghan's "Scab," about two female roommates sharing a boyfriend. And in 2003, WET's production of Julia Jordan's "St. Scarlet" — the first and arguably the best of four plays by Ms. Jordan that were produced in New York that season — became a must-see for followers of Off Off Broadway. "Big Times," WET's new offering, is a play with live music that follows an orphan who models herself after Jimmy Durante; a ukulele-toting burlesque performer; and an unemployable waif with a dove impression. Ultimately, the three stage hopefuls discover that their solo acts are going nowhere but that, as a vaudeville producer tells them, "Individually you're awful; together you're awful good."

Ms. Silverman recalled the plays that she and WET considered collaborating on before they chose "Big Times": "Plays about rape! Bigotry! Murder! Transgender issues! And then I invited Sasha and Victoria to the workshop of this play."

Ms. Eden said: "We saw this show, and it was a big yes. The women in the play are desperately trying to get in a door. It's a true representation of life as an artist."