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Playbill for Def Poetry Jam on Broadway

Extracted on Apr-19-2024 03:07:21

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Sardi's, Broadway's legendary watering hole, stays true to the times

A HOUSE OF TRADITION
by George Maksian

[[image - photograph, by Aubrey Reuben]]
[[caption]] Sardi's dapper managing partner, Max Klimavicius, under the restaurant's famous neon marquee [[/caption]]

On February 15, 1950, after just opening in Come Back, Little Sheba, Shirley Booth was feeling understandable celebratory so she opted, on an impulse, to slip out of the Booth Theatre into a booth at Sardi's. The problem with impulses is reservations. The place was packed with first-nighters who'd just seen her give the performance of her life—it would win her the Tony and the Oscar—and the only spot to seat her was all the way at the back of the room. As she made her way there, diners dropped their forks and jaws, rose as one and cheered the star. Thus it was, with the clapping of those hands, a tradition was born.

Sardi's is steeped in such theatrical tradition. It is writ large on its logo marquee on West 44th St. in the limelight of limelight, the oldest established Broadway clubhouse on the Rialto, serving both sides of the footlights—audiences and artists alike—since 1921. Vincent Sardi père et fils put in their time running "the family store," and now it is run by Max Klimavicius, a dashing Lithuanian Colombian with an exotic accent to match.

When Klimavicius first came to Sardi's from South America 27 years ago, he spoke little English, but it was enough to get him a job as an "expediter" in the kitchen, coordinating orders coming in and going out. He gradually expedited his way up the corporate ladder and, 12 years ago, became managing partner with the essentially retired Vincent Sardi Jr.

In a current Broadway rife with revivals and "revisals" but short of from-the-ground-up originals, Sardi's blends in beautifully, updating and modernizing its menu while trading on its existing traditions, mixing the old with the new to stay true to the times.

Klimavicius believes The Sardi's Martini per se is a myth, although he does quickly and rather modestly concede that "we are known for making a good martini" (translation from the Voice of Experience: never, ever go beyond three of them at a single sitting). "The only drink that I can say that we originated here was something called the Leatherneck Cocktail. It was a drink Vincent Sardi Sr. concocted for the leatherneck fliers of World War II. When military men came into the restaurant, he'd always buy them that drink."

The tradition continues - and so does the bloodline. At the front door is Sean Ricketts, the dining room manager who happens to be Vincent Sardi Jr.'s grandson. (An early calling.)



AUBREY REUBEN
THE WRITING'S ON THE WALL

In the movies, whenever theatrical types sit down to drink and dine, they're usually enclosed by wall-to-wall caricatures-which is cinematic shorthand for Sardi's.

That tradition started in 1927, when a gang of big-cheese journalist formed The Cheese Table there as an alternative to The Algonquin's ritzy Roundtable. At an early meeting a Russian immigrant named

[[image - photograph, Courtesy of Photofest]]
[[caption]] Sardi's goes to the movies (above): Bing Crosby (l), Grace Kelly and William Holden in The Country Girl [[/caption]]

[[image - photograph, by Aubrey Reuben]]
[[caption]] 42nd Street's Jonathan Freeman and Mary Testa (r.) point with pride to their Richard Baratz caricatures. [[/caption]]

Alex Gard proceeded to sketch the people at the table. The results impressed Vincent Sardi Sr., so they bartered: For two meals a day, Gard became the caricaturist-in-residence, and that deal stayed in place (at Gard's insistence) even after times improved and Sardi's could pay him cash.

The deal ended with Gard's death in 1948 (on his drawing board was an unfinished rendering of Jessica Tandy in A Streetcar Named Desire, which she subsequently autographed). His slot was filled by an artist known as Mackey. Partial to liquid lunches, he lasted only a year.

Don Bevan then took up the pen-and 27 years ago laid it down when the current house artist, Richard Baratz took over the task of glamorizing sardi's glittery clientele. "Basically," says Klimavicius, "that's what Sardi's is about. It means a lot to the actors."

Two recently contented customers, both from 42nd Street-Mary Testa and Jonathan Freeman-readily agree. "I've been coming here for 30 year, wondering "What do you have to do to get on the wall at Sardi's?" says Freeman. And what did he find out? "You just keep doing what you're doing, I guess."

[[image - photograph, by Aubrey Reuben]]
[[caption]] Artist Richard Baratz in front of portrait of Vincent Sardi Jr. [[/caption]]

Baratz's quick-study methods passed the Testa test with flying colors. "I met him in between shows," she remembers. "You sit and talk to him. He takes a couple of photos of you at varying angles, stays 15 minutes, then leaves. He does three different pictures and submits them to Sardi's, and they pick one."

There are approximately 1,200 caricatures adorning the restaurant's walls on three of its four floors-first, second and fourth. The older and/or deceased stars tend to float heavenward and settle on the fourth floor.

The lower floors are for the current and the cutting-edge.

Klimavicius has been known to break out the bubbly when a new Baratz is unveiled. "Right now, there are three people waiting to be unveiled- Vanessa Williams, Jason Biggs and Christine Ebersole. We make a little fuss out of it and do a champagne toast."

Over the years, admits Klimavicius, "the style of the caricatures has changed. Alex Gard was a caricaturist. His drawings were not flattering, and many subjects really hated them. Today, Richard Baratz makes it more like a portrait. Because of what this has become, it is more like an official Hall of Fame for actors and actresses on Broadways." - G.M.

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