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Photo by Evan Sung

LE PETIT VERSAILLES: Let Them Eat Cake on Avenue C

by Mikal Saint George

The Palace at Versailles had its origins as a relatively modest hunting lodge - *a little château of brick, stone, and slate* - created by Louis XIII. Enter Louis XIV – the Sun King. A labor of love (partially to himself), he transformed the humble lodge into the most breathtaking architectural feat of its day. In 1682 it became the official royal residence. Few people are aware that the notoriously self absorbed King actually insisted that the palace was for the people and that his home be open to the public. The gates remained open all day to anyone who wished to partake of a bit daily royal shenanigans. Guards only did a routine search of weapons to avoid any harm to the King.

East Houston's Le Petit Versailles is also a labor of love. A formally laid out oasis of green welcoming neighborhood denizens sponsored by Allied Productions founders Peter Cramer and Jack Waters. Don't be deterred by fences or gates at its dual entrances on East Houston or East 2 nd Street, Cramer and Waters insist that LPV's gates be kept open to the public. Like it's more grandiose namesake, it too was once a hunting lodge...of sorts.

The former location of an illegal auto chop shop, it was better known as the epicenter of the area's heroin trade. When the Giuliani administration began its infamous "quality of life" campaign, the tiny parcel was swept clean of hypodermics and carburetors. In 1996 an associate suggested that the Allied boys create a neighborhood garden in the space. Ironically Giuliani's plan at the time created a great deal of strife for established neighborhood gardens. As a result of the property's former status however, it actually enabled the birth of Le Petit Versailles.

Certainly no two had earned the title of landscape architect more than Cramer and Waters. The artists live in the building adjacent to the garden. And if those walls could talk, they would most likely be with slurred speech and occasional paranoid delusions. "Our building was the shooting gallery," Cramer nonchalantly recalls. "People would buy it here, there was no front door on the building. People would go up or just do it in the hallway. The other good thing (laughing) they would yell up and they would just send down a basket! It was like being in the Kasbah"

The partners, both former dancers, originally created Allied Productions in 1981 in order to



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produce multi-disciplined, multi-oriented work that would not be traditionally supported by the masses. Their stated purpose is to promote the arts – not in any particular field or specific artist or art form. True to the artistic pioneering spirit embedded in the very mortar of their neighborhood, the duo was seeking independence and freedom from reliance on other organizations.

This is also part of the impetus for the garden's growing calendar of events. Le Petit Versailles is obligated to be open 10 hours a week from May to the beginning of November in order to maintain its status as a tax-free public park (Allied Productions is technically "Steward of the Park"). "Since we have been always involved in arts it seemed logical. It made no sense for us to sit here and twiddle our thumbs for ten hours a week," recalls Peter.

Performers and artists are mostly found through the Internet and word of mouth. Upcoming events include a film screening of J. Lincoln Smith's **"In Time Falling Bodies Take to Light"** (Sunday July 17, 9:00PM) and **"The Emperor's Premiere"** billed as an Urban/jungle/grunge/drag/sex/summer/hothot/EV fashion show exclusive by it/EQ (designers Carlo Quispe & Ethan Shoshan). The evening promises "Escorted sexy drag models (who) will reveal more than this summer's hottest fashions!" (Friday, July 29, 7:00PM).

Peter concedes that the immediate community is not yet drawn into LPV. "We are still on the edge of development. Most people in the area leave their apartments and head more to the center of the city in general." Let's hope this situation improves. This is a truly a gem in our own back yard!

Le Petit Versailles
Public Hours: Saturday and Sunday 2:00 PM - 7:00 PM
346 East Houston Street at Avenue C | NYC

For a complete list of upcoming events visit:

<http://www.alliedproductions.org/cgi-bin/view.cgi?n=/lpv/home.xml>

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