

Times Square by Footnote

Friday noon and the four person staff of the Times Square BID¹ visitor center (located in a converted theater lobby) on West 42nd are buzzing with last minute preparations for the weekly walking tour.² "Okay, gather 'round everyone, the tour is about to begin. My name is Michael,³ I am a actor, dancer, cabaret performer, musical theater director, and tour-guide, not necessarily in that order."

The tourists momentarily stop whispering to their respective companions and join together in a collective chortle. "The new Times Square and Forty-Second Street is in the midst of an incredible renaissance and renovation,⁴ the Times Square BID has improved the sanitation and we have one of our two sanitation guard.. uh.. security guards⁵ with us on the tour today, say hello to Rudy, everyone." Rudy, whose regalia (white shirt, black pants, boots, walkie talkie with a shoulder speaker, and a flashlight cum turn-out-the-light stick) could be described as Pinkerton-Canadian Mountie, doffs his Smokey the Bear hat which features a nickel

badge reading "T.S. BID Security Force."⁶ "Our first stop is going to be the Palace Theater. I am empowering you to get there quickly. Some people pay psychiatrists to do this for them. Now have a race to see who gets there first."

[*Inside the Palace, Michael says*] "The main thing I want to impress you with is that Times Square is about products, packaging and selling, and all those things that America does so well." While looking up at the cerulean and gold set of Disney's Beauty and the Beast at the Palace Theater, Michael tells the group, "By the way, this show here is really all the rage, they use real TNT on stage and many of the stunts are life threatening"⁷ We then go on to the Hudson theater, which is actually a former theater that now adjoins a hotel lobby. "This theater has been the center of a lot of struggles; there have been union disputes,⁸ battles over artistic license such as whether to show avant-garde playwrights like Chekhov, Beckett, Shaw, and Ibsen. Now it belongs to the Millenium Hotel that uses it for special events."⁹ By the

way it's a great hotel. Johnny Mathias was recently a guest here."

Next we visit the Lamb's Club and Michael chides members of the group for having difficulty walking up the four flights to the theater. "Pretend I'm your personal fitness trainer." I slipped away at that point to buy a nail clipper and caught-up with the tour at its final stop in the theater behind the BID office. I found Rudy dozing in the back of the lobby. The theater conveyed none of the assured vision of the spruced-up lobby. In fact, it still looked rather like a porno theater. As Michael pattered about "the revival of Ninth Avenue," "restaurant row...try some food you've even *heard* of, don't just eat at McDonald's — by the way, there is a special one on 46th Street" and "how it would be a crime not to see *at least* two Broadway shows while you're here,"¹⁰ the air in the musty theater seemed to growing hotter and more stale. ■

— Zachary Barowitz

1. Business Improvement Districts (BID) are a city-run program to counteract municipal disinvestment in neighborhood services and amenities. It permits property owners to agree to pay a voluntary tax to the city to finance amenities, such as street cleaning and security to provide a better business climate — effectively the privatization of public culture.

2. Tours are an opportunity for direct marketing of their vision to the public.

3. Michael is a plucky man in wire frame glasses about 31 years old.

4. Because of rampant sex shops and theaters showing X-rated films, the block was condemned. The street is currently a ghost save for three kitsch retail stores on the east end, the marginally open New Victory Theater, and the only holdover, the Grand Luncheonette, a hot-dog stand.

5. The BID also sponsors "an interdisciplinary team of psychiatric social workers and drug counselors to provide therapy on the streets for those people who refuse services and refuse...to leave the streets." (Alan Graison, "Raising the BID in Times Square"; *Times Square Times*, a promotional magazine published by the Times square BID) Imagine being detained in Paris on the Montmartre steps to submit to a blood test and a 12-step program!

6. Mike Davis writes of the proliferating role of private security guards in contemporary urban design. (See *City of Quartz* esp. chap. 4 "Fortress L.A.")

7. The extent to which his huckstering was ironic was a mystery to me.

8. He neglected to mention the protests against non-union activities perpetrated by the New Victory Theater (a Disney venture).

9. They don't use it for anything.

10. Although the BID is a private organization, the program is state sponsored so the state acts on the behalf of high-powered private interests (*privitas?*).