

Pyramid Michael Musto

If ever a club had a Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland “Let’s put on a show” feeling to it, it was the Pyramid, the ramshackle but comfortable East Village dive filled with oddballs, outcasts, and fabulosities angling to throw on some tinsel and get their attention-hungry asses on that stage. In the 1980s, the ongoing parade of money led to a bunch of large, glitzy NYC dance clubs aimed at mixing bohemia with paying customers, but the East Village scene simmered in reaction to that, providing an exclusive home for the disenfranchised and unpretentious, all filled with a beautiful rage to live. The Pyramid was the jewel in the E.V. crown, a hotspot with a unique set of anything-goes ethics and its own stable of stars. It turned what was once a blue-collar bar into a spirited free-for-all managed by Bobby Bradley and filled with drag queens, performance artists, and just plain artists like Brian Butterick, Stephen Tashjian, and Mark Phredd, all outdoing themselves in creative bouts of outrage.

In my non-fiction guide to the scene, *Downtown* (1986), I described the Pyramid as “smoky, dirty, narrow, crowded, and totally fabulous.” It was so divey, in fact, that the facilities didn’t tend to work, so Benjamin Liu (a/k/a drag diva Ming Vauze) told me he once had to pee behind a pole in the back just to keep going. But that was part of the place’s unapologetic brashness. “The Pyramid is totally unafraid,” said the club’s publicist Susan Martin at the time, which was true, since audiences came there to be shocked, amused, and titillated in ways they might not get from the glossier clubs and their more mainstreamy grabs at boho culture. The crowd that gathered at the Pyramid was freewheeling, zany, anti-establishment, and a lit bit angry; they were tuned in to all sorts of pop culture trivia, but also were cognizant of world happenings, which were sometimes referenced in the less disposable stuff that went on at Pyramid, the ultimate variety show.

The most prestigious offering at Pyramid was John Jesurun’s 44-part “living film serial” *Chang in a Void Moon*, the kind of thing that could appeal to avant-garde theater lovers of the LaMama school, as well as to the occasional wacky drag queen with an enterprising bent that extended beyond camp. And performer John Kelly did some heady shows there, including playing Dagmar Onassis, the illegitimate daughter of Ari Onassis and Maria Callas. (Kelly told me, “If you perform in a place like Pyramid, you can perform anywhere else”—meaning that the immediacy of the audience and the performer’s unavoidable involvement with them made it impossible not to be engaged in the moment and learn from it.) But there were also enjoyably silly trifles like *Psycho III—The Musical*, done on a mere \$100 budget, though the postering cost a few bucks extra.

Like Club 52 before it, the Pyramid was a place for people who didn’t fit into traditional theater or uppity clubs to work out their stuff for a willing crowd who didn’t expect too much and yet expected a lot. And they definitely got it!