ALL THE COOP’S A STAGE: HOW THE CHEESE SHIFT TURNED INTO A SLASHER SATIRE

August 14, 2024

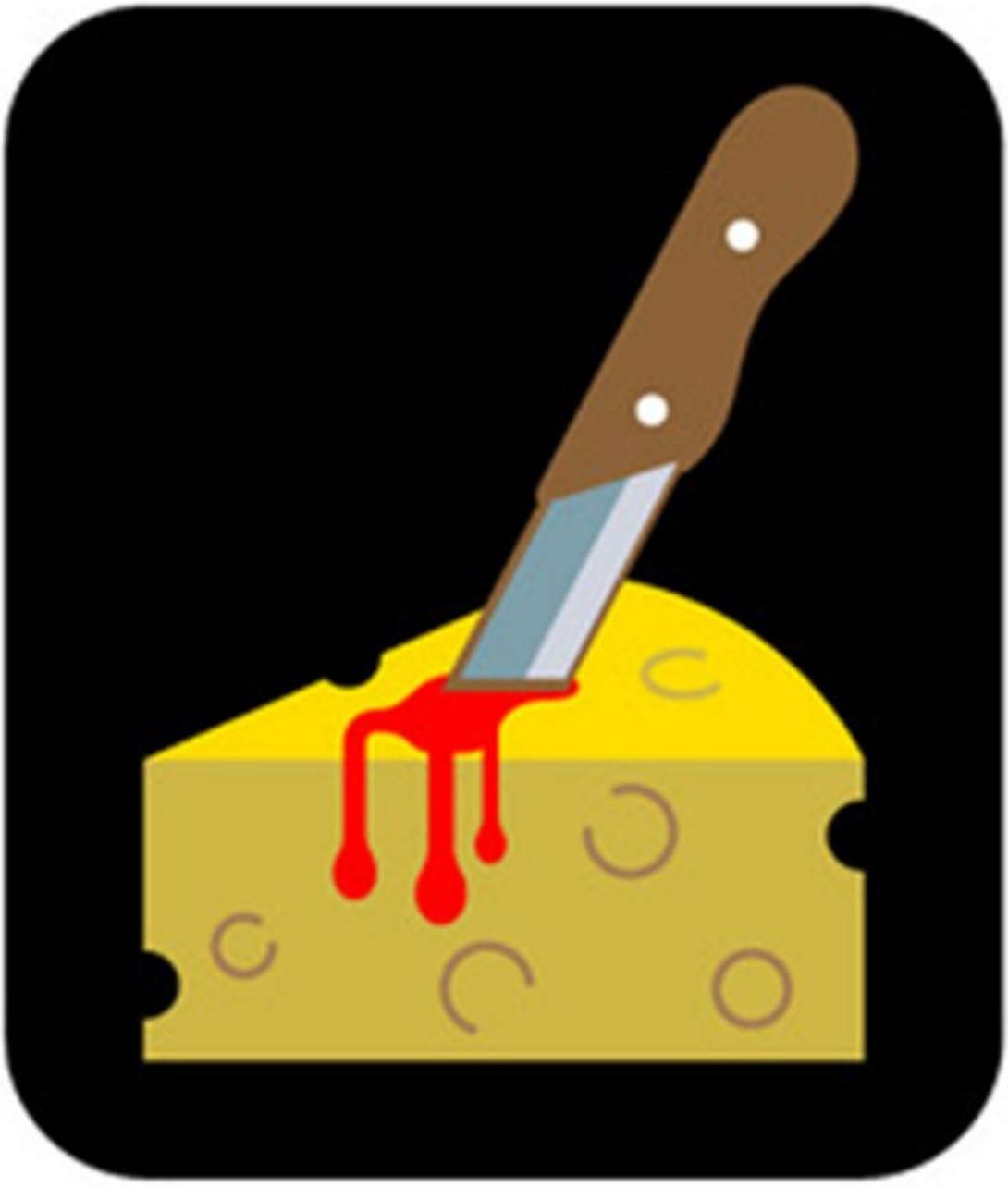


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

By Zach Schiffman

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Working a shift at the Coop can often feel inherently theatrical: the conversations of strangers that you overhear, the clattering and chaos in the aisles as shoppers jostle with stockers, the mysterious corners of the basement.

Madison Fiedler, a playwright and Coop member, picked up on that. Her experiences as a cheese shift regular inspired *Homofermenters, or The Park Slope Co-op Play,* which debuted in June at Ars Nova's Ant Fest in Manhattan.

The annual festival is dedicated to new work from emerging, adventurous artist-s. Alumnae of the festival include theatrical luminaries like Jeremy O. Harris, Michael Breslin and Patrick Foley, as well Bowen Yang of *Saturday Night Live*.

Fiedler's show follows six Coop members working the Friday 6 a.m. cheese shift. As each shift passes, conflict increasingly curdles. When a team leader suddenly dies, all hell breaks loose in the cold Coop basement.

Fiedler collaborated with director Francesca Sabel on the "satire-turned-slasher." Sex, murder and the merits of collaboration are all on the table, as well as cheese (which Sabel points out comes from rotting milk, "controlled death.")

After the show's debut at Ant Fest, I spoke with the pair about what inspired *Homofer-menters*, what they discovered researching the Coop, and if there are future plans for the show. (Warning: Some of the discussion contains spoilers!)

Was there a defining moment during a shift at which you decided to write about the Coop?

Madison Fiedler: My very first shift I worked in stocking. I accidentally slashed open nine bags of flour. I was like, "I can never do this again. This is the most humiliating experience of my life, of course."

I was asking friends who were members what shifts they'd enjoyed the most. A friend

of ours, Joan, told me about the cheese shift and was like, “It is so cold down there. My body sort of rejected it, but it is the most fun.” It’s a hard shift to get. You’re just handling cheeses and learning about them and you’re down in this kind of underbelly of the place.

It feels like a shift that is exemplary of a lot of the things that are funny and also silly about the Coop. Everyone’s talking about how incredibly priced the cheeses are the whole time. Everyone’s talking about how good it feels to work with their hands, which is mentioned in the show. You’re cutting a small piece of cheese and you’re doing it for 2 hours and 45 minutes.



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Francesca, you directed this show without being a member. What is and was your impression of the Coop from the outside?

Francesca Sabel: I grew up in New York, so I feel like the Coop was always around. I went to Hunter College High School and there were a lot of Coop families there. I re-

member whenever I would go to a Brooklyn friend's house, it would be like, "Just so you know, this meal was made with groceries from the Coop."

So it's kind of sanctified in that way. Madison described it in this way that was so exciting, because it was like you were so aware of all the things that were a little bit ridiculous about it and also so aware of all the things that are amazing about it.

And it felt like part of the tonal and thematic thing that this piece was always doing was offering those both at the same time and being like, "It is insane that there are people who take the size of the wedges so seriously." But also, "Isn't it cool that there are people who take the size of the wedges so seriously?" And that's how this thing against all odds has survived for all these years.

Without spoiling details from the show, what do you think is parallel about the Upper West Side community and that of the Coop?

Sabel: My Upper West Side parents came to the show and they were very sort of hurt by the ending. I think that in both cases, you have people who have figured out a sort of approach to the city that feels different. You're near parks, it's New York with all the benefits of greenery. There are delicious restaurants and there's a tremendous amount of privilege infused in every step you take in both the Upper West Side and Park Slope.

I think that is because those communities are pretty insular even though they're in these big cities. I remember growing up and then getting to high school and college with people who had grown up in different parts of New York, thinking "This actually isn't really New York. This is a bubble within it."

The show is both a horror and a comedy, but it's also very erotic. What about the cheese shift brought in those three different directions?

Fiedler: For one reason, I want more horny art for lesbians. We started working on this

show with one of our actors, who ended up getting Covid and not being able to do the show, but is this extraordinary actor Moe Angelos who is in the Five Lesbian Brothers, this iconic downtown lesbian theater group that did a lot of work in the ’90s.

We’ve collaborated with her before and I knew I wanted to write a part for her. She played all of these really ridiculous horny parts and did them so well back in the ’80s and ’90s. And I wanted to write a semi-retired lesbian lothario kind of part for her. I am so interested in the history of Park Slope as this historically lesbian neighborhood, and the role of lesbians in its gentrification.

When I am at the Coop, I feel like I see older queer people more than I do other places. It’s an amazing thing, to see all these old lesbians stocking soy crackers.



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What inspired the murder mystery elements?

Fiedler: I thought the environment lent itself well to that. The nature of the Coop is

this Sisyphean repeating effort. The stakes are built in, because people care so much and that's what also keeps it alive and keeps it going. There are all these rules that can feel ridiculous, but are also the thing that keep it intact. It is constantly straining against itself, full of these internal collisions and contradictions. Doing some research for the show, I went to a general meeting, and conflict bubbles up in a very theatrical way.

Sabel: We wanted to feel that in the show, too. Our sound designer, Michael Rogerson, took a trip to the Coop with Madison and recorded ambiance which became our transition sounds. You could hear real Coop boxes being lifted, with strings underneath to sound ominous.

I was obsessed with Emmaline's (the uptight shift leader who dies) monologue. It pulls from the history of the Coop, but also feels like a political stump speech. What went into writing that?

Fiedler: All of the characters have interludes that provide some kind of access to their interiority, in an otherwise ensemble, plot-heavy show. Emmaline's speech is about the history of the Coop and kind of where she sees herself in its lineage.

I read a lot of old *Linewaiters' Gazette* articles, and did my own research. There was this amazing book, *Stirrings: How Activist New Yorkers Ignited a Movement for Food Justice,* about food activist movements in New York. There's a whole chapter in the Coop. It's an amazing read. This book quotes this Coop member in the *Gazette*.

The member, Rich Richardson, wrote in the *Gazette*: "I believe that in this decaying society there will be formed enclaves like monasteries, which nourish progressive ideas in dark ages. Park Slope can be such an enclave. Formal political organization has waned, but a living political organism (our Coop) has become bigger in size and in meaning. Voting with our feet (or with a moving van) we cast a ballot for a people's cooperative and against an individual fortress."

Sabel: I remember being really struck by the amazing things that were happening when the Coop was formed. Roe v. Wade was being decided. The Twin Towers were going up. There was this sort of progressive movement, and now Roe v. Wade and the Twin Towers aren't things that exist anymore. The Coop was founded in a lot of hope and optimism; if we trace how all of these things come into our present moment, that hope and optimism gets complicated. I think Madison's script is really thoughtful about how the Coop aligns with the history of gentrification in Park Slope.

It's bittersweet. The show is satirizing what the Coop is now, while honoring what it once was.

Fiedler: One hundred percent. The Coop is this attempt at utopia in a grocery store, that's building a microcosm of the world you want to inhabit. I feel a strong resurgence of a want for that. Young people feel like they are living in the end times. It struck me that the Coop was founded by six friends who were anti-war organizers and had all of this motivation toward making change and creating a better world.

But when the Vietnam War ended, they were like, "What do we do with this?" I think the Coop is a miraculous thing or it wouldn't be worth poking fun at. I'll be honest. I mean also I am aware of the ways that I am a textbook young, white, gay leftist Coop member. I am not so different from these kinds of ridiculous characters.

Was there anything in your research that didn't make it into the show, but stuck with you?

Sabel: This isn't exactly research, but I do think one of the things that we kept feeling like we were running out of time for was there are just so many fun potential murder weapons in the cheese section. Sure, cheese knives. This actually got cut off in the production, because of limited tech time, but we wanted our final gesture to be someone stretching a cheese wire. You see someone get clobbered with a 40 pound wheel of Parmesan.

Fiedler: I worked my first shift since the show the other day, and I kept texting cast members. I was operating the back lift to bring a U-boat down to the bulk section in the basement. And I was like, “Fuck. This could have been a way for them to get the body upstairs.” There was also a lot of research on the history of cheese that could not make its way in there. Even the title *Homofermenters*, I didn’t get to explain what that means, and what the role of homofermenters in cheese-making is, but that’s a fun little secret for us to get to keep.

While thinking about what didn’t make it in, are there plans for the show again? What can *Gazette* readers look forward to?

Sabel: In a really beautiful way, Madison and I work together a lot. I’m very sort of obsessed with Madison. We have been working on a different show that is very precise and quiet. We were sort of like, “What is the opposite of that?” So we did *Homofermenters* for Ant Fest, which is one night only, 70 minutes or less. I think it was designed to be in an ephemeral, batshit context too.

But if somebody was like, “You know what, if the Park Slope Coop wants to host a Homofermentors, we will definitely do a site specific Homofermentors.”