Wednesday, January 24, 2018

The Cabaret Law Repealed! What's Next? - Social Dance at the Dance/NYC Symposium

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Here at JComm, we are getting excited as we plan for the Dance/NYC Symposium and our panel discussion on social dance and the underground nightlife scene. We will be talking about the new Office of Nightlife, the role of government regulation in DIY arts spaces, and more. One thing we hope to celebrate at our event is the recent repeal of NYC's Cabaret Law!

Did you know that until this year, there were very few places in the city where it was legal for New Yorkers to dance? The Cabaret Law dates back to 1926, and it required venues such as bars, nightclubs, and dance halls to obtain a cabaret license in order for dancing to be legal on the premises. Obtaining a cabaret license has historically been very difficult, with countless parties involved in the approval process and many levels of confusing bureaucracy. In fact, according to the New York Times, out of an estimated 25,000 venues for food and drink in New York City, only 97 of these venues had obtained a cabaret license by the end of 20`7.

As so few venues were successful in obtaining a cabaret license, the Cabaret Law was historically weaponized to shut down unlicensed nightlife venues, especially spaces serving communities of color and queer spaces. In its early years, this law was used to shut down interracial dancing in Jazz clubs, and more recently, the Giuliani administration relied heavily on the Cabaret Law as a tool to shut down many nightlife spaces, particularly those serving marginalized communities.

Many individuals and organizations have been engaged in the fight to repeal this law for decades. The movement achieved a great victory in October of 2017 when City Council passed a bill, introduced by councilmember Rafael Espinal, to repeal the Cabaret Law. Our committee started learning more about these efforts last fall, attending, for example, an event put on by the NYC Artist Coalition (one of the many organizations engaged in the efforts at repeal) entitled "Save NYC Spaces." We met a variety of people from a variety of organizations, all speaking to the unique challenges faced, as well as the innumerable contributions offered, by the NYC community of DIY underground arts spaces.

The Cabaret Law may have been repealed, but there is still much work to be done to ensure that these spaces and these artists are protected. As the city builds its new Office of Nightlife and appoints its first ever Night Mayor, what does it mean for government regulation to enter spaces that emerged out of a need to gather--a need that has historically (and currently) been denied to people of color by government structures? How can government regulation help these spaces and artists create and thrive, and how do we ensure that the Office of Nightlife works to combat gentrification and rapid real estate development? These are all questions that we will be discussing on February 25 at our session at the Dance/NYC Symposium. We hope you will join the discussion! Stay tuned for more blog posts introducing some of our fantastic panelists and more important questions facing the NYC nightlife community. And register now for the Symposium by clicking here!

FURTHER READING:

- The full text of the Cabaret Law
- Cabaret Law Factsheet compiled by the NYC Artist Coalition
- NYC Artist Coalition page with information about the Cabaret Law Repeal
- Selected Articles about the repeal of the Cabaret Law:
  - New York Times: "After 91 Years, New York Will Let Its People Boogie"
  - NPR: "With Its 'No Dancing' Law Verging On Repeal, New York Legitimizes Its Nightlife"

For more information on Dance/NYC Junior Committee, please click here.