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D'Amour's Labor of New Orleans Love
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photo: Libby Nevinger



Nita and Zita: Cajun acrobatics

Playwright Lisa D'Amour remembers just when the obsession started. The designer Olivia Wildz handed her a photo of two women wearing wild headdresses sprouting enormous peacock feathers. "What really struck me was their gaze," D'Amour recalls. "They were looking down their noses straight at the camera. I felt they were daring me to come and find them."

D'Amour took the dare. Along with Wildz and a growing ensemble of women who came to share the fixation, she began researching the on- and offstage lives of Flora and Piroska Gellert, immigrants from a Hungarian shtetl who toured the world with their burlesque-tinged, acrobatic dance shows from the 1920s to '50s, and ended up as recluses, colorfully decorating every square inch of their dilapidated house in New Orleans, D'Amour's hometown.

The result, *Nita and Zita* (the Gellerts' stage names), is an introspective and highly sequined musical cabaret exploring the fuzzy lines between art and life. Having won an Obie in 2003 after a brief run in New York, *Nita and Zita* returns to HERE on January 27.

"The piece has an intimate spectacular surface and a dark undercurrent," says Todd London, artistic director of New Dramatists, where D'Amour is a resident playwright. "It's by turns beautiful, mock sentimental, peppy and vivacious, sad. And it's just plain fun."

Accompanied by pianist Tom McDermott, Kathy Randels and Katie Pearl play both themselves and the sisters, commenting on their creative lives and demonstrating some of *Nita and Zita's* ingenious choreography.

D'Amour and her co-creators built the piece, she says, out of "a collage of evidence and hearsay." She found little trace of the Gellerts in performance archives and turned to "the old-school New Orleans route: knocking on doors and talking to neighbors." Few had much to offer about the women, who came out of the house—in their elaborate, hand-sewn costumes—only to buy groceries or to patch their roof. D'Amour and company even consulted a local psychic, who conferred with one of the Gellerts' costumes and a chunk of their ceiling to determine that one sister had conceived a child. (Neither had children. Nita died in 1985, Zita in 1991.)

"Their mystique," says D'Amour, "started to become as important as their actual story."