

Mercer Arts Center Digs Out

By JOYCE WADLER

Playwright Peter Swet tries to joke about it; "My play brought the house down before the house opened," he says.

The play was Swet's first, scheduled to open in The Mercer Arts Center in the old Broadway Central Hotel last Friday—the day the building collapsed.

Now Swet's play will be opening in a new location. For the Mercer Arts Center,

like the Broadway Central—or the University Hotel, as it had been renamed recently—is no more.

Located in the second floor and back half of the hotel, the Arts Center housed six theaters, two acting workshops, a cocktail lounge, a boutique, and a rock club. The loss of the privately owned entertainment complex, which opened only three and a half years ago, is estimated at \$1 million. Five shows which were formerly playing in the Center are now searching for new homes. And the brief run of what its admirers called "The Lincoln Center of Off-Broadway" is over.

"Because a large portion of the center, on Mercer St., behind the hotel, remained standing, some people were hopeful that the center might be saved," said a spokesman for Seymour Kaback, who owns the Mercer Arts Center. "But now, it's definite that whatever is left of the building must come down."

"We'd like to keep the Center going, to find another home, preferably in the same area, and keep the shows together," he continued. "But now each of the shows are trying to find theaters of their own, because for now,

we have nowhere to go."

The shows, besides Swet's "The Interview," include "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest," "El Grande de Coca-Cola," "The Proposition," "Tub-Strip," and "Henry, Sweet Henry," which was scheduled to open this week. Swet's show will open this Friday at The Theatre De Lys, in the Village.

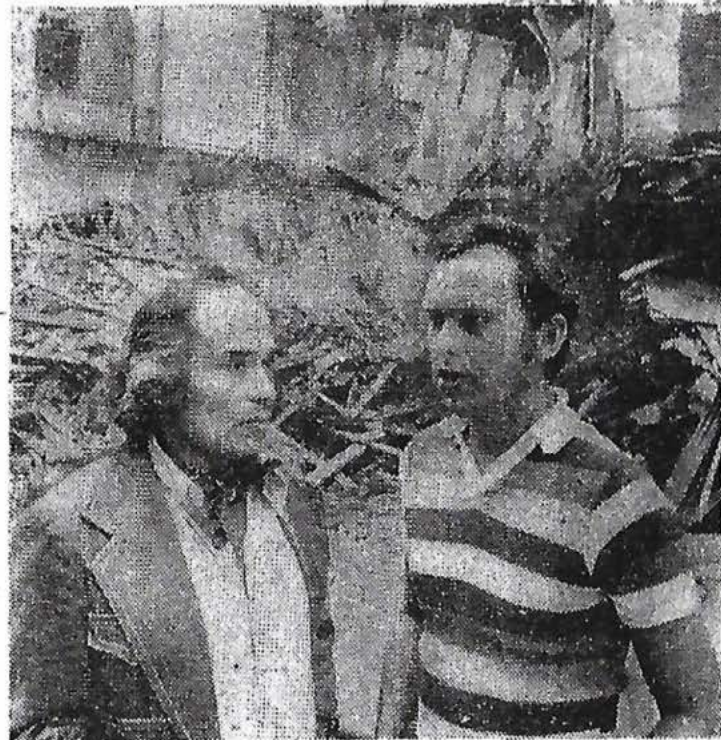
The scene is particularly dismal at the office of the producer of "One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest," which was to go into its 1000th performance next week, setting a record for an off-Broadway drama.

"We'll be putting on a benefit performance for the victims of the collapse as soon as we find a theater to perform in," said producer Lee Sankowitz. "Meanwhile, we have no permanent place to go. We're just salvaging whatever we can in the way of props and costumes."

Director Gene Frankel, who had run a workshop in the Center, stood on Broadway and sadly surveyed a portion of his office, which had been destroyed when the hotel fell.

"There's 25 years of theater memorabilia on that wall," said Frankel.

"We were going to open



Post Photo by Terence McCarten
Director Gene Frankel, left, and playwright Peter Swet, in front of the remains of the old Broadway Central Hotel.

this week," said Brenda Van Scheinck stage manager of "Henry, Sweet Henry." "It was a showcase production, no one was getting paid, we were just doing it for the exposure."

"My band was going to open here in October," said Jack Abbott, manager of "The New York Central," who had come to the Center to retrieve his files.

"It would have been our first paid performance here," he said. "But we feel sentimental about this place, because we showcased here a lot. Maybe 50 bands did also. In the last year and a half, it was the most important showcase a band could get in New York. I don't know where the new bands will be able to go for exposure now."