“Scummy” Acts
Valerie Solanas’s Theater of the Ludicrous

Humor is not a body of logical statements which can be refuted or proved, but is rather a quality which appeals to a sense of [the] ludicrous.
—Valerie Solanas, The Diamondback (1957)

On May 10, 1965, a twenty-nine-year-old aspiring dramatist named Valerie Jean Solanas registered an unpublished one-act play with the US Copyright Office. Solanas called her satirical comedy *Up Your Ass*, but the official title listed on her application is *From the Cradle to the Boat, or Up from the Slime*. “[J]ust in case the play should ever become a Broadway smash hit,” the doggedly optimistic Solanas reasoned, “at least there would be something acceptable to put on the theater marquee.”

1 Indicative, in many ways, of the theatrical experimentation and countercultural expressions taking root during the mid-1960s, Solanas’s script is unique in its depiction of lesbian sexuality and nothing short of pioneering in its articulation of a feminist consciousness. Remarkable for its explicit portrayal of female desire, sexual subcultures, and urban street life, *Up Your Ass* chronicles the exploits of Bongi Perez, a self-described “vivacious, dynamic, single . . . queer,” who cruises “real low-down funky broads, nasty bitchy hotshots.”

2 The protagonist, like the play’s author, is a wiseass butch dyke of Hispanic descent (Solanas’s paternal grandparents immigrated to the United States from Spain) who hustles for a living, panhandling and prostituting. This drama features a multiracial cast of dueling drag queens, beatnik hipsters, hapless johns, a feces-obsessed femme fatale, and a housewife-cum-homicidal lesbian terrorist. Homosexuality is a given rather than a problem to be addressed, and degeneracy is redefined as a “scummy” virtue, which enables social devi-
ants and sexual minorities to escape a diseased patriarchal society. Solanas’s licentious humor and risqué characters were so beyond the pale that her play scandalized avant-gardists, political radicals, and pornographers alike. Despite trying every avenue imaginable, she could find no one willing to publish or stage the script during her lifetime.

Written prior to the sexual revolution and the Stonewall rebellion, *Up Your Ass* offers a riotous and uproarious parody of heteronormativity, racial stereotypes, and gender roles. It is acknowledged here as one of the earliest, most provocative, and profoundly seditious lesbian feminist plays in the history of American drama. This work has been denied the critical attention it deserves for several reasons: the script was believed, until very recently, to have been lost; the play has been overshadowed by the author’s later and better-known work, *SCUM Manifesto* (1967); and any consideration of Solanas’s innovation or artistry has been eclipsed by her attempted assassination of Andy Warhol. In 2010 I discovered Solanas’s copyright application (the first of three she would file in as many years to protect this and subsequent works) along with the original manuscript of *From the Cradle to the Boat*, which has languished in the Library of Congress for over four decades. My research has led to a series of startling revelations that not only recast the social drama of the 1960s but also urge us to recalibrate the models and methods we have used to construct the artistic and political legacies of this volatile period in America’s past. In this, the first comprehensive critical analysis of Solanas’s dramaturgy, I track the creation, “loss,” and recovery of this extraordinary play, as well as its influence on a genre the author invented called a “SCUMMY thing,” a guerrilla theater event that is best understood as a kind of gutter dyke “happening” or “situation.” Archival evidence confirms that Solanas considered *SCUM Manifesto* to be a script for a “SCUMMY thing” and that she was in negotiations with Warhol to produce and film one at the time of the shooting. Through close readings of these performative texts and a careful charting of their social and cultural contexts, I delineate the tenets of an aesthetic of gaiety I term Solanas’s Theater of the Ludicrous.

“Up from the Slime”

Much of what is written about Valerie Solanas is based on hearsay and half-truths. Like most outlaws, her identity is cloaked in myth and legend. For
someone who played such a prominent part in the social drama of the 1960s, and who frequented one of the most obsessively documented sites in the twentieth century, Warhol’s Factory, Solanas remains surprisingly, if not conveniently, anonymous. The paucity of data and ambiguity of evidence only contribute to her lore. With so little information about her, we are free to make of this woman what we will: predator, prey, casualty, survivor, whore, man-hating menace, filthy dyke, paranoid schizophrenic, militant radical, misunderstood genius, diabolical anarchist, homicidal maniac. Some cast Solanas as the hero of an epic tragedy; others depict her life as a melodrama, painting her as the victim of oppressive social forces. My narrative tends toward farce. It explores the absurd situations in which Solanas found herself and marvels at the ingenuity, creativity, and fortitude she had to muster to play the hand she was dealt.

Solanas was nothing if not a card. Born April 9, 1936, she grew up on the Boardwalk in south Jersey, where she developed her talents as a grifter, a gabber, and a good old-fashioned working girl. Her maternal grandfather, with whom Solanas spent a great deal of time as a child, inspired her thespian proclivities with stories of working in burlesque, where he and a partner had a song, dance, and comedy routine. What Solanas lacked in formal training in the theater (she had none), she made up for in raw talent, unbridled determination, and the fact that she had been performing her entire life. She cultivated her talents and developed her aesthetic sensibilities as survival skills that enabled her to make it through the 1950s and 1960s as a woman, a queer, and an aspiring artist. Long before she mastered the art of peddling conversation, hustling johns, or wheedling her way into Warhol’s films, Solanas learned about the magic power of “as if.” She was introduced to this technique by her father, Louis Joseph Florent Solanas, a charismatic alcoholic with a violent temper and pedophilic tendencies. Acting in the high-stakes drama of childhood sexual abuse, Solanas improvised characters with the urgency and efficiency of someone whose life depended on the part she was playing. She learned at an early age that one must, in the words of Jon McKenzie, “Perform or Else,” do or die.

Valerie was by all accounts a wild child, and her problems escalated after her mother, Dorothy Marie Biondo, a blonde bombshell with the visage of Lana Turner, divorced Louis, relocated the family to Maryland, and married Frank “Red” Moran. Solanas was expelled from Catholic school for hitting a nun, and by the age of twelve she was running away on a regular basis, hitchhiking all the way to her aunt’s house in Baltimore. She was thought
to be a lesbian by members of her extended family, though no one talked openly about Valerie’s sexuality, not even when she got pregnant in high school. Solanas’s younger sister Judith recalls, “I was told that Valerie had a baby, he was adopted by a ‘decent’ family and there was to be no more discussion about it. . . . I doubt if anyone cared about Valerie’s feelings.” After the baby was born in 1953, Solanas and her son lived with the Blackwells, a high-ranking military family whose teenage son served in the Korean War with the sailor alleged to be the baby’s father. In spite of these events, she completed high school on time, with the class of 1954. The caption underneath Solanas’s senior portrait in the Oxon Hill yearbook reads, “Val. Brainpower and a lot of spirit.” The Blackwells paid for Solanas to attend the University of Maryland, and after she went away to school, she never saw her son again.

What others saw as mistakes, moral failures, and character flaws, Solanas saw as resources. She cultivated a raw and rapacious sense of humor from the material conditions in which she lived and labored. Throughout her life, Solanas subsisted on very little, but her resourcefulness is evident in her determination to get an education and later to publish and produce her artwork. In college, she majored in psychology. She worked in an animal lab testing the conditions under which rats would learn to avoid electric shock. These clinical trials would inform Solanas’s theories of biological determinism and fuel her belief that males are genetically inferior, the result of a chromosomal deficiency. When she was not in the lab, Solanas hosted a call-in radio program where she posed as a therapist offering advice. She wrote letters to the editor of the campus paper, *The Diamondback*, where her public tirades against men, marriage, and middle-class values earned her the nickname “Maryland’s own little suffragette.” In 1958 Solanas graduated with honors (with a 4.4 grade point average) and was inducted into Psi Chi, the psychology honor society. That fall she enrolled in a PhD program at the University of Minnesota, but finding the course of study unbearably sexist, she left within the year. “The purpose of ‘higher’ education is not to educate,” she concluded, “but to exclude as many as possible from the various professions.” Years before the women’s liberation movement, Solanas identified the link between economic injustice and systemic misogyny.

Valerie thumbed rides from Minneapolis to San Francisco’s Bay Area, where she encountered a burgeoning counterculture, one characterized by free speech and free love, artistic experimentation, and political radicalism. It was in the Bay Area that she perfected a gay way to earn a living that satis-
fied her philosophical objection to capitalist exploitation and her desire to spend as much time as possible writing. In an article titled “A Young Girl's Primer on How to Attain the Leisure Class,” published in Cavalier magazine in 1966 (as “For 2¢: Pain, the Survival Game Gets Pretty Ugly”) Solanas explains her ingenious economic strategy.\(^\text{11}\)

Being fresh out of college I found myself in a typically feminine dilemma of carving out for myself in a male world a way of life appropriate to a young girl of taste, cultivation, and sensitivity. There must be nothing crass—like work. However, a girl must survive. So, after a cool appraisal of the social scene, I finally hit upon an excellent-paying occupation, challenging to the ingenuity, dealing on one's own terms with people and affording independence, flexible hours, great stability, and most important, a large amount of leisure time, an occupation highly appropriate to female sensibilities. I contemplate my good fortune as I begin work for the day:

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“Pardon me, Sir, do you have fifteen cents?”
“Sure, Sweetie, here.” It's my wild body—it gets them almost every time.
“Pardon me, Sir, do you have fifteen cents?”
“No.”
“You got a dime?” You gotta keep bugging them.
“No.”
“Nickel?”
“NO!”
“Dollar bill?” Think big.
“Here, here's a quarter.”
Adds up fast. Four-fifty an hour. Two hours and I can knock off and write.\(^\text{12}\)
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Panhandling, supplemented by the art of shoplifting, provided this budding anarchist with rent and food. Blessed with the gift of oracular spontaneity and a penchant for scatological rhetoric, Solanas specialized in selling conversation, an hour's worth for six dollars.

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“Pardon me sir, do you have fifteen cents. . . . ?”
“What do I get for fifteen cents?”
“How 'bout a dirty word?”
“That's not a bad buy. Okay, here. Now give me my word.”
“Men.”\(^\text{13}\)
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Occasionally these dirty words would lead to dirty deeds: a quickie in the alley, a tumble in the sheets, or a three way with her friend Mary Lou, which was a big score: up to twenty-five dollars and three days off to write.

“A Young Girl’s Primer” evokes and embodies the labor of hustling, pimping, and performing in vividly material ways. Part male titillation and part pedagogical performance, this essay, rendered in the form of a dramatic monologue, educates female readers (and there were many who enjoyed erotica, even then) about the problems and pleasures of being a woman and a lesbian in a straight man’s world. While not exactly the stuff of agitprop, this performative essay tempts women with the promise of a better, more fulfilling life as an out lesbian, greater opportunities for career advancement, and significantly more leisure time. If it romanticizes life on the streets and the benefits of working in the informal economy by downplaying the dangers associated with panhandling and prostitution, especially for working girls without a pimp, it also minimizes moral objections to sex work, a woman’s right to self-determination, and queer forms of intimacy. Indeed, this “excellent-paying occupation” provided Solanas with ample time and resources—not to mention colorful content—with which to complete her first play script, *Up Your Ass*.

“I’m so female I’m subversive”

Solanas produced a small but revolutionary body of autobiographical work that was born out of and intimately linked to the history of her flesh. Her scripts inaugurate a critical lexicon and a performative lens through which she staged both private and public permutations of class, gender, sex, and sexuality. Solanas’s plays are meditation on the ways in which socioeconomic conditions shape women’s lives and how the realities of our material existence shape us as subjects. She engaged the labor of theater to embody and valorize women’s work. *Up Your Ass*, like “A Young Girl’s Primer,” salutes the ingenuity and inventiveness of rogues, rebels, and renegades who subvert the dominant culture at every juncture, repurposing its effects to their own ends, so that others might live, love, and laugh with a greater sense of freedom than they might otherwise be allowed.

This play begins with what may be the best, and possibly the most hilarious, dedication to women’s labor and creativity in American literary history. It reads:
I dedicate this play to
ME
a continuous source of strength and guidance,
and without whose unflinching loyalty, devotion
and faith, this play could never have been written.

additional acknowledgements:
Myself—for proofreading, editorial comment,
helpful hints, criticism and suggestions
and an exquisite job of typing.
I—for independent research into men, married
women and other degenerates\(^\text{14}\)

The dedication’s parodic structure, heroicical posturing, sardonic wit,
and overt feminist sensibility are key elements of Solanas’s dramaturgy, and
they form the cornerstones of what I am calling her Theater of the Ludi-
crous. Indicative of this genre is self-conscious formal experimentation; ex-
licit eroticism that pushes the accepted boundaries of middle-class sexual
norms; a pronounced anticapitalist critique; a profound engagement with
European philosophy, especially existentialism, nihilism, and absurdism;
the employment of a wry, irreverent, and satirical tone; and, finally, a pen-
chant for wordplay, scatological speech, and linguistic innovation.

_Up Your Ass_ eschews a linear plotline, and the action unfolds in a series
of episodic, interrelated comic vignettes that become increasingly distur-
bing as the play progresses. Every scene takes place in a realistic locale, but
they all involve actions and events that are so preposterous, shocking, and/or
violent that they transform what are seemingly neutral or safe spaces—
the steps of an apartment building, an expensive restaurant, a classroom,
and a playground—into defamiliarized zones that serve as vehicles for social
critique. The outrageous antics depicted in the play call for a broad acting
style that defies naturalistic conventions. The humor in _Up Your Ass_ alter-
nates among corny, caustic, and campy. This play exudes the kind of scum-
my brilliance that radiates from glamazons of the gutter—hookers, grifters,
and transvestites—who engage in battles of wit with members of the ruling
class, breeders, and proponents of “great art.”

The play opens with the protagonist, Bongi Perez, a cross between Beebo
Brinker and Joe Orton. She is “dressed in khaki pants, a loud plaid sports
jacket and tennis shoes” loitering on the steps of the apartment where she
“Hell'o Beautiful,” Bongi calls out to a woman passing by. When the broad ignores her, Bongi shouts after her, “Stuck-up bitch.” As is evidenced by the central character’s attire and her first line of dialogue, Bongi is a dyke, and an aggressive one at that. She does not “come out”; she is openly and unapologetically queer from the word go. Bongi flirts with a second woman who wanders by, and then a third. “Give me a kiss,” she tells this one, “and I’ll let you pass.” After yanking the broad’s chain, and mocking her boyfriend to his face, Bongi declares, “[S]he’s not really my type” and lets the scared straight couple go about their business.

Bongi is Solanas’s alter ego, and she dramatizes, in delicious detail, how the author withstood the indignities and injustices of being female and queer in Cold War America: with humor, irony, intelligence, and wit. Solanas took tremendous pleasure in exploiting the complex gendered contradictions of the 1950s and 1960s. Rather than accept received biological “truths” and cultural dictates, she rewrote the scripts about what it means to be a woman, a lesbian, and an artist. Like Bongi, Solanas presented as a butch dyke who made no effort to pass as straight. On the contrary, she costumed herself in such a way as to draw attention to her gender transgression. Her uniform, which consisted of a jaunty sailor’s cap, navy peacoat, and blue jeans, served as a sartorial index of her alterity and a challenge to normative codes of comportment. Solanas performed her daily life as a gender outlaw at a time when enactments of what Judith Halberstam calls “female masculinity” were seen as not only monstrous but sufficient cause for arrest and forced hospitalization. Solanas’s performance as a masculine woman and an out dyke provided an arresting, if not terrifying, alternative to traditional gender norms.

Rather than rejecting her female body, as many butches at that time did, Solanas understood, validated, and harnessed its erotic power. She made her living from the art of seduction through sex work, a profession rooted in illusion and gender play. The gritty streets of Berkeley, and later New York’s East Village, provided some of the only spaces in which women, not to mention lesbians, could engage in gender subversion. There was no theater scene for lesbians then, and dyke bars permitted only specific, circumscribed, and highly codified enactments of gender transgression. Solanas was known, on special occasions or at the request of a client, to sport a dress, high heels, even lipstick. Far from the idealized image of the brooding, melancholic butch that made femmes like Joan Nestle swoon, Solanas was gregarious, gay, and very public in her flagrant disregard for both hetero- and homo-
sexual conventions. The enactment of such a complex nonconforming character is something we typically associate with the performance art of Peggy Shaw and Holly Hughes at the WOW Café in the 1980s or with drag kings like D.R.E.D. and Mo B. Dick in the 1990s, but Solanas perfected the art of gender subversion decades earlier.

As Bongi blatantly cruises chicks, two men, one black and one white, who have been watching the show from across the street join in on the action. Spade Cat tries to pick up Bongi. When she playfully rebuffs his advances, he and White Cat enter into a competition to see who can score a chick first. Undone by his tired pick-up lines and lack of finesse, White Cat exclaims, “I may as well turn in my yo-yo; all the swinging chicks’re either queer or they go with spades. A white man doesn’t have a chance nowadays. What’re we stuck with? All the fish.”19 As White Cat exits, a well-dressed, middle-aged man walks by, discreetly eyeing Bongi. “Hey, Joe,” she asks, affecting a Spanish accent, “you like to meet my seester?” The john, named Alvin Koontz, fancies himself a “connoisseur of fine living.”20 He reads all of the “zestful men’s magazines—Tee-Hee, Giggle, Titter, Lust, Drool, Slobber . . . and Lech,” which he keeps next to his revolving bed, the kind, he boasts to Bongi, that “they feature in Playboy.”21 Although he claims that he’s so dynamite in the sack that women typically pay him for sex, Koontz tells Bongi he’s willing to spend a few dollars to let her have the opportunity of seeing him in action. When he asks her the price tag for an experience that she will never forget, Bongi replies:

Well, for fifty bucks you get five minutes with a three-quarter minute intermission. For an additional ten bucks I sneer, curse and talk dirty. Then there’s my hundred dollar special, in which, clothed only in a driving helmet and storm trooper boots, I come charging in, shrieking filthy songs at the top of my lungs.22

When Koontz balks at the price, Bongi offers him the bargain special of twenty-five bucks and assures him that she’ll do almost anything that is not repulsive, like “kiss men.”23 Bongi tricks Koontz out of dinner at the fancy restaurant next door. Over their meal, she tells salacious stories about previous tricks and performs a number of lewd dances that get her john so horny that he settles for quick hand job in the alley.

*Up Your Ass* explores the material reality of lives lived under particular conditions and in extreme, sometimes fantastical, situations. The play is
redolent with the hunger and desperation that attends abject poverty, yet Solanas's tone is humorous and the action is interrupted, in a Brechtian sense, by song, dance, and acts of vaudevillian shtick. Over the course of this episodic drama, Bongi emerges as a picaresque hero, a charismatic rogue of low social standing and questionable ethics who chooses to live by her wits rather than “honorable” work. Picaresque literature is a highly theatrical genre, originating in Spain in the sixteenth century, in which play functions as a means of survival and empowerment that enables characters to circumvent the pathos of lives lived on the margins. An itinerate drifter, the picara wanders among people from all walks of life, exposing and ridiculing the hypocrisy and corruption of different castes, including her own. Unrestrained by prevailing moral codes, the picara lies, cheats, and steals her way in and out of situations, often barely escaping punishment. As a picaresque drama, Solanas’s *Up Your Ass*, serves as an ironic and satirical comedy of manners, but it also offers audiences rich and detailed portraits of people from social, racial, and sexual subcultures rarely seen on stage, even today.

After Koontz ambles dejectedly down the street, Bongi resumes her seat on the steps of the apartment, waiting for her next adventure. “Miss Collins,” she shouts to a “made-up, bitchy-looking drag queen” sashaying down the street. The two greet each other warmly, sharing physical affection and complimenting each other on their looks. Their gab session is interrupted by another drag queen named Scheherazade, Miss Collins’s nemesis. “Oh, Gawd. She is without a doubt, the most garish, tasteless faggot I’ve ever run across. I’m ashamed to be seen with her. Look at her—1965 and she’s wearing wedgies.” Bongi and Scheherazade exchange greetings. Although she clearly likes both queens, Bongi, the consummate trickster, cannot resist the opportunity to cause some mayhem. She instigates a little drama by praising Scheherazade’s physique. You’ve got a fine ass, she tells the belle, you’ve “got an ass just like a girl.” Jealous, Miss Collins fishes for a little flattery. When Bongi tells her, “You are very pretty, for a boy,” she seethes with rage. This fuels a heated debate about whether drag queens are men or women. “I AM a piece of pussy,” insists Scheherazade. “That’s just what I’ve always said,” retorts Miss Collins, “you have a face like a twat. Twat Face! Twat Face.” “Oooooo,” fumes Scheherazade, “I despise faggots.” “I despise men,” Miss Collins interjects. “Oh, *why* do I have to be one of them? Do you know what I’d like to be? A Lesbian. Then I could be the cake and eat it too.”

As the two queens continue reading each other, Scheherazade hits Miss Collins with her purse, which begins a game of pushing each other down the street and offstage.
The quotidian endeavors dramatized in *Up Your Ass*—trash-talking, hustling, and cruising—are more than ritualized behaviors designed to pass the time; they are acts of survival and resistance. Bongi is not simply a homeless person; she is part of the very fabric of her neighborhood, intimately connected to the stoop on which she sits, the sidewalk she paces, and the alley where she turns tricks. Bongi makes things happen—her words have an impact, and her gestures have consequences. She commandeers public space, discomforts middle-class heterosexuals, and topples sex and gender hierarchies. She lives and works on the street, which serves as the locus, indeed the heartbeat, of this queer community.

As the drag queens exit the stage, a young woman named Ginger emerges from one of the apartments. “Say, Miss, did you, by any chance, see a turd anywhere around here?” Initially, Bongi thinks the woman is referring to the john she just hustled, but she quickly realizes that Ginger is searching for an actual turd. When Bongi questions this behavior, Ginger explains that she is hosting a dinner party for a man she really wants to impress and “Everybody knows that men have more respect for women who are good at lapping up shit.” Ginger is a “Daddy’s Girl,” which Solanas defines in *SCUM Manifesto* as

passive, adaptable, respectful of, and in awe of the male. . . . Trained from early childhood in niceness, politeness, and “dignity,” in pandering to the male need to disguise his animalism, she obligingly reduces her “conversation” to small talk, a bland, insipid avoidance of any topic beyond the utterly trivial—or, if educated to intellectual discussions, that is impersonal discoursing on irrelevant abstractions—the Gross National Product, the Common Market, the influence of Rimbaud on symbolist painting.

Having completely internalized society’s misogyny, Ginger eats what she is, a lowly, abject turd, the excremental residue of civilization.

She offers to set up Bongi on a blind date with Russell, a noted “expert on women,” who is joining them for dinner. “You’ll adore Russell,” Ginger tells her; “he’s extremely talented, absolutely brilliant mind: he writes, very unique outlook—he satirizes women; and he writes the most brilliant essays—you can’t understand a word of them.” As they wait for their dates to arrive, the women become better acquainted. Ginger tells Bongi about her job. “I deal with really fascinating men—all neurotics. I adore Neurosis; it is so creative.” “Men have so much better judgment than women,” Ginger asserts. To which Bongi retorts, “Yeah, they dig women.” “I don’t like to
brag,” Ginger interjects, “but I could never get along with other women; Those mincing snots, they turn my stomach. . . . I’m completely attuned to the gripping dynamism of the male mind.”

We learn that Ginger is an aspiring novelist struggling to combine marriage with a career. “What’s even trickier,” Bongi tells her, is to combine no marriage with no career.”

In the middle of their conversation about art, philosophy, and religion, Russell arrives bearing bags of gourmet goodies for the repast he is about to prepare. Before he consents to the blind date, Russell gives Bongi a vocabulary quiz to see if she’s up to his level. Although she fails to answer all of the questions correctly, and he is clearly not attracted to her physically, Russell accepts Ginger’s arrangement, believing it will lead to sex. “You’re not too bad looking,” he tells Bongi, “or, at least you wouldn’t be if you’d put a skirt on and look like a woman.”

“Why should I dress to give men hard ons?” Bongi rejoins. “Let them get their own hard ons.”

Shocked by Bongi’s lack of femininity and hostility toward him, Russell proclaims Bongi “sick” and “unsanitary” in addition to being frigid and humorless.

“Women take yourselves too seriously,” he spouts. “You can’t take a joke.” Bongi replies, “No, I dig jokes. I’m just waiting to get the stage so I can tell my funnies.”

Ginger diagnoses Bongi with penis envy and suggests that she visit a shrink. She recommends Dr. Aba Gazavez at the Marriage and Family Institute, who has developed a theory called creative passivity.

Bongi shares with Ginger and Russell her own theory of creative passivity: “When I’m on my knees,” she quips, “I get paid.”

The revelation that Bongi is a prostitute both repulses and excites Russell. He inquires about the precariousness of the profession, to which Bongi responds, “It has its ups and downs.” Sensing her guest’s titillation, Ginger expresses her longing to be an “artful courtesan,” a “high priestess in the temple of love, fulfilling the time-honored role of pleasing men.”

The noblest profession, Russell informs her, is motherhood: “the crowning achievement, what every woman is aching for . . . the highest honor, the supreme power.”

Deferring to male authority, Ginger states, “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world.”

“That’s a slick little maxim,” Bongi interjects, for “while the hand’s rocking the cradle it won’t be rocking the boat.”

She tells Ginger that if women were freed from the shackles of maternity, they could rule the world. Suddenly inspired, Bongi states, “Maybe being president wouldn’t be such a bad idea. I could eliminate the money system, and let the machines do all the work.”

Having suffered long enough listening to Russell’s drivel, Bongi launches into a conversation about sex determinism and the elimination of the male
species. This diatribe presages Solanas’s call for male genocide in *SCUM Manifesto*, which begins:

> Life in this “society” being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of “society” being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and eliminate the male sex.\(^48\)

Bongi explains to Russell that men are “half-assed women,” or, as Solanas would soon put it, “The male is a biological accident . . . an incomplete female, a walking abortion . . . a machine, a walking dildo.”\(^49\) Russell responds by calling Bongi “a desexed monstrosity.”\(^50\) “Quite the contrary,” she quips, “I’m so female I’m subversive.”\(^51\) Russell’s insists that he is repulsed by Bongi and wouldn’t have sex with her “for a million dollars,” nor if she “were the last woman on earth.”\(^52\) Bongi demonstrates that he, like all men, is “obsessed with screwing” and will “swim a river of snot, wade nostril-deep through a mile of vomit, if he thinks there’ll be a friendly pussy awaiting him. He’ll screw a woman he despises, any snaggle-toothed hag, and furthermore, pay for the opportunity.”\(^53\) All Bongi has to do is unbuckle her belt, and Russell gets down on his hands and knees and begs her for sex. As the two go at it behind the bushes, Russell discover Ginger’s turd, which turns into a celebration. In a ludicrous ending to a ludicrous scene, Ginger leads the cast in “Dance for Turd.” Spade Cat and Bongi join in while a dejected Russell goes inside “to start soaking his squid.”\(^54\)

This musical interlude is followed by a second number, which Bongi calls “Dance of the Seven Towels,” a parody of the “Dance of the Seven Veils” performed by Salome for her uncle, King Herod, in order to inflame his desire and grant her the head of John the Baptist. The “Dance of the Seven Veils” mythologizes the origin of belly dancing, and it has a long and storied association with other forms of erotic dancing, including burlesque, striptease, and, beginning with Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* (1894), drag.\(^55\) Bongi satirizes the pretensions of modern dance in her sapphic rendition of this classic form.

> [A]fter ripping off the seventh [towel], I soap myself up, work myself into a lather, then the chorus girls, all wearing shower caps, flog me offstage with wet washrags. Then there’s my modernistic fan dance—I use an electrical fan. . . . For my grand finale I short-circuit myself before your very eyes.\(^56\)
Horrified by Bongi’s mockery of Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and Loie Fuller, Ginger calls out, “Russell! These Philistines! They’re trampling on ART!” The scene comes to a close with Ginger hooking up with Spade Cat, while Bongi and White Cat take advantage of a free meal.

The penultimate scene takes place at Dr. Aba Gazavez’s Creative Homemaking Class at the Marriage and Family Institute, the purpose of which is to indoctrinate young women into compulsory heterosexuality and teach them how to be “Daddy’s Girls.” The course, Gazavez explains, is rooted in “the belief that marriage should be FUUNN! FUUNN! FUUNN! but, responsible fun, the fun that derives from duty and sacrifice.” The doctor boasts that the institute’s philosophy has “kept some of the most incompatible couples together.” The curriculum consists of household basics: “cooking, marketing, budgeting, dusting, childrearing and fucking,” with a goal of integrating fucking into all of the other activities. For example, the teacher explains, the class will work toward combining fucking with dishwashing and child care. “Wait until hubby’s getting ready to take his bath; then, quick, [s]oap up the baby bottle brush, working it into a nice, foamy lather; then when hubby’s all nicely naked and is leaning over to test his bath water, you come te-e-a-a-r-ing in . . . (Demonstrating) . . . r-a-a-m-m-ing the brush right up his asshole.” At this point, a group of boys enters the class for a hands-on exercise in fucking. Assuming the (missionary) position, the girls move along to the beat of the doctor’s hands. One girl, Marlene, starts deviating from the script. When the teacher catches her tweezing the anal hair of her partner, the doctor scolds her: “please confine yourself to fucking. The Marriage and Family Institute doesn’t exist to turn out prostitutes, just simple, basic, serviceable wives.” Doctor Gazavez ends the lesson with a prayer: “Oh, God, Our Father, Son of the Holy Ghost, Husband of Mary, give us this day our daily cookies, but, most of all, make our marriages FUUNN! FUUNN! FUUNN! Ah-men.”

The final scene returns us to Bongi, who is seated on the steps cruising chicks. “Hey, Dishrag,” she calls to a woman who walks by. “If you’re calling me,” the woman shoots back, “my name happens to be Mrs. Arthur Hazlett.” Bongi tells her that Arthur is a funny name for a woman and Dishrag is much more appropriate for a wife, which is, after all, something to wipe things up with. “What makes you so sure I won’t wipe up the street with you,” responds Arthur, relishing the flirtation. “This could be the beginning of a beautiful romance,” Bongi teases her; “one shared experience is all it takes.” Their foreplay is interrupted by Arthur’s son, referred to only
as Boy, who has superglued his penis and can’t get it back in his pants. Exasperated, Arthur sends him back to the playground. “I’m one of society’s rejects,” she tells Bongi, “a wed mother.” Bongi asks her why she stays married if she doesn’t find the relationship fulfilling. “Well, you know how women are,” Arthur says, “loyal, faithful, dedicated and reliable.” “Yeah,” replies Bongi, “and they oughta get slammed right in the teeth for it.” Arthur admits that she’s afraid her son will grow up to be a faggot if he doesn’t have a father. “That’d be just as well,” Bongi tells her; “let the guys ram each other in the ass and leave the women alone.” Boy returns, and this time he’s glued his pee hole shut, causing him to throw a tantrum. Arthur loses her temper, and the boy goes away crying.

Arthur complains to Bongi about her sex life and confesses that she’d “like to do something radical and daring.” Going out on a limb, she propositions Bongi. “What say you and me ball tonight? I’ll bet you’re a crazy lover.” Clearly uninterested in serving as a diversion for a frustrated housewife, she tells Arthur, “Actually, I’m a lousy lover—I’m too good a talker.” Pleading with Bongi, Arthur says, “Ah, come on; I’ll bet you’re a titillating bundle of eroticism.” Bongi ends the flirtation by telling Arthur that’s she’s just not her type. “You know what really flips me? Real low-down, funky broads, nasty bitchy hotshots, the kind that when she enters a room it’s like a blinding flash, announcing her presence to the world, real brazen and public. If you ever run across any broads look like neon lights,” Bongi tells her, “send ’em my way.” Arthur handles the rejection in stride. “Send ’em your way,” she jokes. “From now on I’m in business for myself.” When she sees Boy coming up the street, she bellows, “Here comes that little prick again.” Something in Arthur snaps as she “grabs the boy by the throat and squeezes it. Snarling, her closed teeth bared and her eyes bugged, she picks him up by the neck and hurls him to the ground, squeezing hard all the while.” Boy tries to scream but cannot. The stage directions read, “(His face turns blue; she continues to squeeze for another fifteen seconds; she then throws him to the ground, picks up a garden shovel lying near the bush and begins to dig behind it).” “Not here,” yells Bongi, who has witnessed the entire scene; “it’ll attract dogshit. There’s enough turds rolling around here as it is.” Arthur chooses a spot farther back, digs furiously, tosses the boy in, and covers him with dirt. “You’re a good head,” Bongi congratulates her, “even if your name is Arthur.” In front of them passes a chick. “Hell’o, you beautiful, low-down funky doll,” coos Arthur. “Hey, you like to meet my seester,” offers Bongi. “Why not,” responds the woman. “I have an eye for the ladies.”
As Bongi and her broad move out of sight, Arthur calls out, “What’s the other eye for? Whores?” Their voices fade away as the play ends.

Solanas’s *Up Your Ass* passes beyond the absurd, beyond the ridiculous: her lesbian feminist comedy is absolutely ludicrous. What I am calling Valerie Solanas’s Theatre of the Ludicrous begins in 1965 with the completion of her first play. *Up Your Ass* not only predates what is called “women’s theater” by five years, if we take *It’s All Right to Be Woman Theatre* (1970–76) as the progenitor of this movement, it was more formally innovative, politically daring, and affectively challenging than the plays created and staged by female collectives like the Women’s Experimental Theatre and At the Foot of the Mountain. Trafficking in essentialist notions of gender and stereotypical depictions of feminine attributes, women’s theater collectives typically performed in an earnest, didactic tone. In contrast, Solanas preferred satire and employed a highly ironic mode of storytelling that would become the hallmark of multicultural groups like Spiderwoman Theater and the Flamboyant Ladies in the mid- to late 1970s.

Thematically and stylistically, *Up Your Ass* has more in common with the work of gay male playwrights, such as Ron Tavel and Charles Ludlam, and the trashy brilliance of performance artists like Jack Smith than it does with the dramaturgy of the women’s theater movement. In fact, the year Solanas copyrighted *Up Your Ass*, 1965, is the same year John Vacarro and Ron Tavel debuted their Theatre of the Ridiculous. While this troupe evolved to include lesbians, such as the amazing Lola Pashalinski, it was primarily a gay male collective. Although Solanas’s Theater of the Ludicrous shares many traits with the Theatre of the Ridiculous, these forms were developed completely independent of one another—the former on the West Coast and the latter on the East Coast. Valerie’s sister Judith confirms that Solanas wrote *Up Your Ass* before she moved to New York. She told me, “Valerie wrote the play or at least the first draft while living in Berkeley.”

A comparison of the inspired raunchiness of these two forms of experimental theater illuminates many of the tensions around which *Acts of Gaiety* is structured and sheds light on the misogynistic and lesbophobic underpinnings of the male-dominated queer counterculture of the 1960s. Both the Theatre of the Ridiculous and the Theater of the Ludicrous break with the dominant trends of dramatic realism by calling for a broad acting style with minimal stage settings and props, fantastical settings that reach far beyond the drawing room, and characters who exhibit neither coherent nor
stable identities. Both experimental forms feature contrived scenarios, taboo subjects, and indecorous acts—nudity, graphic sex, and outrageously queer couplings—designed to shock audiences out of their conventional Cold War morality. Finally, parodic depictions of high art and campy reworkings of popular culture serve as sources of humor and vehicles for social critique.

While Vaccaro and Tavel privileged improvisation over the sacredness of the scripted text (which Solanas held dear), the primary difference between these playmakers has less to do with their mode of presentation than it does with their plays’ reception and success.

Spectators and critics alike loved the visually and verbally confrontational Theatre of the Ridiculous. They could not get enough of Vaccaro and Tavel’s spectacles. The raunchier and grosser the better—like the performance featuring Siamese triplets joined together at the anus or *Turds in Hell*, which stars a guy whose cock (evoked by a surrealistic papier-mâché penis) is so huge that he cannot control his bowel movements. Every time he takes a step across the stage, excrement squirts out of his ass and drips down his leg. The obscene vignettes, Rabelaisian humor, and scurrilous satires of the Theatre of the Ridiculous packed houses, garnered reviews in both the underground and mainstream press, and brought Vaccaro, Tavel, and their associates (especially Charles Ludlam) at least a modicum of fame and fortune. Whereas fabulously filthy acts of gaiety by queer men evoked (then but also now) praise for being avant-garde, subversive, and revolutionary, the same acts, when committed by a gender-non-conforming dyke, elicited disgust and derision.

Although Solanas—whose path would soon cross that of the Ridiculous crowd—was working in a similar vein with analogous themes and common plot elements, her play was judged to be indecent, vile, and repulsive. *Up Your Ass*'s caustic wit, unapologetically dykey sensibility, and feminist consciousness proved to be absolutely repugnant not only to producers and directors but to publishers and pornographers as well. The play, along with her subsequent work, was dismissed as the misguided musings of a maladapted, menacing lesbian. If it was ludicrous for Solanas to believe in 1965 that Americans were prepared for such a bold, brutally honest, and mordantly mirthful work of art by a female playwright, then it was equally preposterous for her to believe that she could forge an alternate world in which her talents would be valued. But this is exactly what she did—or at least tried to do—when she moved to New York City and took aim at the very heart of white, male, middle-class privilege.
Peddling her Ass

With *Up Your Ass* in hand, Solanas hitchhiked across the country in the spring of 1965. When she arrived in New York City, she took up residence at the Village Plaza, a seedy single-room-occupancy (SRO) hotel at 79 Washington Plaza, filed a copyright application for her script, and immediately began peddling her *Ass* all over town. A supremely methodical and practical woman, Solanas systematically hawked her play to publishers, pornographers, directors, and producers. One of the first places she submitted *Up Your Ass* for consideration was a magazine called *The Realist*, a nationally distributed counterculture journal. The brainchild of future Yippie Paul Krassner, *The Realist* was popular for its sexually charged content and unflinching satirical portraits of American culture. Although Krassner cannot recall exactly when Solanas shared the script with him, it seems likely, given subsequent events that I document here, that it was in the summer or early fall of 1965. He does remember, however, that he declined the invitation to print the script in his magazine: “I rejected it on the grounds that I had no overwhelming desire to share Valerie’s misanthropic evangelism with my friends.” Despite his misgivings about Solanas’s man-hating rhetoric, he found *Up Your Ass* amusing and was intrigued enough to meet her in the lobby of the Chelsea Hotel. The satirists hit it off, and their conversation continued over lunch at the Automat on 42nd Street. The two became, in the words of Krassner, “deep acquaintances.” He invited Solanas to guest lecture in at least one class he taught at the Free University, and he most likely aided her in publishing “A Young Girl’s Primer on How to Attain the Leisure Class” in *Cavalier*, a Playboy-style men’s magazine for which he was a regular contributor. Solanas’s article appeared in the July 1966 issue alongside an essay on black humor by Krassner and humorous reflections by Timothy Leary, Dick Gregory, and Ray Bradbury. Ever the hustler, she tried to interest the editors of *Cavalier* in a regular column called “The Lesbian at Large,” which they regrettably declined.

Undeterred by Krassner’s rejection of her play, Solanas sent the script to Ralph Ginzburg, editor of *fact: a magazine* (1964–67), a satirical journal about society and politics with a muckraking bent. An author, photojournalist, and publisher of erotica, Ginzburg was convicted of violating federal obscenity laws in 1963 on the grounds that his *Eros* (1962), a hardcover “magbook” featuring writing about sexuality in history, politics, art, and literature, was pornographic. Having received the script while he was in the process of appealing his conviction all the way to the Supreme Court, Ginzburg was not
only afraid to publish *Up Your Ass* but he was reluctant to return the manuscript to Solanas via the US mail lest he be charged with a second violation for trafficking in pornography. He told Solanas that if she wanted her script back she would have to collect it in person. Sometime after she retrieved the play from Ginzburg, Solanas sent the script to Andy Warhol.

Any number of events might have inspired Valerie to market *Up Your Ass* to Warhol in late 1965. Perhaps she had seen Andy film Robert Heide’s one-act play *The Bed* at Caffe Cino earlier that summer. Perhaps she heard that Warhol “employed” writers like Heide and Tavel as scenarists for his films. Or perhaps she read in a newspaper that Warhol was looking for new acts to sponsor and simply cold-called him, as she had done Krassner and Ginzburg. Based on the success of the Velvet Underground, which Warhol began managing in 1965, and the popularity of his Exploding Plastic Inevitable multimedia events, the impresario had decided to solicit other interests in which to invest his capital. “We had so many people hanging around all the time now,” Warhol remarked, “that I figured in order to feed them all we’d have to get other people to support them.” Andy ran ads seeking products, projects, and personalities to sponsor, like this one in the *Village Voice*.

> I’ll endorse with my name any of the following: clothing, AC-DC, cigarettes, small tapes, sound equipment, ROCK ‘N’ ROLL RECORDS, anything, film, and film equipment, Food, Helium, Whips, MONEY; love and kisses Andy Warhol. EL 5-9941.

However Solanas made contact with Warhol, one thing is certain: she gave him *Up Your Ass* in late fall 1965 or January 1966. On February 9, she wrote him a letter asking for the return of the script, which had been in his possession for some time.

Warhol corroborates this in an interview with Gretchen Berg, conducted in the summer of 1966, in which he stated:

> [W]e have cops coming up here all the time, they think we are doing awful things we aren’t. People try to trap us sometimes: a girl called up here and offered me a film script called *Up Your Ass* and I thought the title was so wonderful and I’m so friendly that I invited her to come up with it, but it was so dirty that I think she must have been a lady cop.

Solanas found Warhol’s suggestion that she was an undercover vice cop so amusing that she shared the story with Krassner, reenacting for him the
events that transpired during that meeting. “Sure I’m a cop,” Solanas told Andy, zipping down her fly to expose her vulva. “And here’s my badge.” Warhol didn’t know what to make of Solanas. “I don’t know if she was genuine or not,” he told Berg, “but we haven’t seen her since and I’m not surprised. I guess she thought that was the perfect thing for Andy Warhol. I don’t resent situations like that but I’m not interested in subjects like that, that’s not what I’m pushing, here in America.” What Warhol was interested in pushing was male homoeroticism (e.g., Blow Job [1964], Hand Job [1964], Taylor Mead’s Ass [1964], and My Hustler [1965]), the heterosexual divas and the drag queens they inspire (e.g., 13 Most Beautiful Women [1964] and Poor Little Rich Girl [1965]), and female degradation (e.g., Bitch [1965] and Prison [1965]). Like Krassner and Ginzburg, Warhol had zero interest in the lesbian feminist aesthetic Solanas was promoting.

When Warhol failed to respond to her letter or return Up Your Ass, Solanas began phoning him on a regular basis and showing up at the Factory. By everyone’s account, Warhol’s “stupidstars,” as Valerie liked to call his sycophantic minions, were unspeakably cruel to her, especially Viva and director Paul Morrissey. Andy, on the other hand, typically treated her with, if not civility then, bemused curiosity. As time passed, he appeared—at least on the surface—to become more open to Solanas’s ideas, engaging her in a number of his projects and even entertaining the possibility of producing her play. As Warhol was all artifice, a consummate performer who cultivated a reputation for being neither genuine nor sincere (except about making money), it is difficult to say whether he actually thought Valerie possessed any talent or was simply humoring her because he found her artistic pretensions and political theories amusing. He had a high tolerance for mentally unstable people, especially women, whom he enjoyed watching self-destruct. Unlike femme fatales Edie Sedgwick, Andrea Feldman, and Tinkerbelle and drag divas Holly Woodlawn and Jackie Curtis, Solanas did not attempt suicide; she attempted murder.

“From the Cradle to the Boat”

Solanas enjoyed a cordial relationship with Warhol in 1966 and 1967, even after he failed to return her copy of the play, and she remained hopeful that he would help stage Up Your Ass. Nonetheless, she continued to pursue other production opportunities, very few of which materialized. By the mid-
1960s, there were over three hundred off-off-Broadway theaters in New York City dedicated to promoting new work, experimental dramas, and queer performances—places like Caffe Cino, La MaMa E.T.C., Judson Poets’ Theatre, and the Play-house of the Ridiculous. While these venues provided an increasing number of opportunities for theater by gay male playwrights (e.g., Edward Albee, Doric Wilson, and Lanford Wilson), women (e.g., Adrienne Kennedy, María Irene Fornés, and Megan Terry), and people of color (e.g., LeRoi Jones, Larry Neal, and Ed Bullins), none of these locales was particularly receptive to plays about lesbians by lesbians. At a time in New York City when it was still illegal to stage depictions of homosexuality, no establishment was willing to risk closure to produce a sardonic, sapphic spectacle like *Up Your Ass*.

Unable to find a publisher or producer for *Up Your Ass*, Solanas decided to sell copies of the play in order to finance a production that she would direct herself. On October 13, 1966, she placed an ad in the *Village Voice*.

Photo offset copies of
“UP FROM THE SLIME”
by Valerie Solanas
are now available at
$10 per copy
222 W. 23rd St. Room 606

Solanas refers to the work as *Up from the Slime*, rather than *Up Your Ass* because the *Voice* did not print profanity in feature stories or advertisements. Of the various titles of the play, *Up from the Slime* most explicitly evokes a scum aesthetic, which Solanas would continue to cultivate as both a performance praxis and a political theory over the next two years. Equally important, this simple three-word title would have been cheaper to print than *From the Cradle to the Boat*, or *Up from the Slime*. Money was a constant problem for the author, especially after she moved to the higher-rent Chelsea Hotel (the address listed in the ad), and given the price of the script—$10.00 in 1966 is the equivalent of $66.44 in 2010—fund-raising was clearly Solanas’s objective.

Within four months she had earned enough money to typeset and publish the script. On February 2, 1967, Solanas placed the first in a series of ads in the *Village Voice* book section announcing:
This ad, which lists the play at $1.50, as opposed to the original $10.00 she charged for the offset copies, offers proof that Solanas mass produced the script, thus accounting for both the lower cost and the wide availability at numerous Village book stores. Solanas placed a second, almost identical notice in the *Voice* the following week, on February 9. The next day she filed for a second copyright on the play. On February 10, 1967, Solanas registered a work titled *Up Your Ass, or From the Cradle to the Boat, or The Big Suck, or Up from the Slime* and “A Young Girl’s Primer on How to Attain the Leisure Class, a Non-fictional Article Reprinted from Cavalier” under the imprimatur SCUM Book.

The text of the 1967 published version of the play is the same as the 1965 unpublished edition, with a few notable exceptions. The original manuscript, on file at the Library of Congress, is a carbon copy of a hand-typed document numbering sixty pages that is bound with two staples. It is riddled with typographical errors (clearly Solanas skipped secretarial classes in school!), which were corrected using white tape and blue ink in the author’s hand.\(^{106}\) The published version is professionally typeset (and error free). It totals twenty-nine pages (the result of a very economical mode of professional typesetting). The entire document—the play script, article, and leaves—numbers forty-three pages and is bound with a cover—yellow in the front and blue in the back held together with two machine staples down the left edge. The arresting front cover bears the title of the play, written in the author’s hand, in black marker across the top. At the bottom, in the same script, is the title of the article. In between the text is a drawing of a white arm rising defiantly out of a black morass (literally “up from the slime”).
Reminiscent of the iconic “black power” fist, the hand in this image is also gesturing, but it is shooting the bird. Although the 1967 script, with its “do-it-yourself” scummy cover art, might project the appearance of a mimeographed pamphlet, the document is, in fact, a published work of literature. Many seminal texts produced in the 1960s, from chapbooks to manifestos, evidence a similar amateur aesthetic, and this is especially true of works advancing critiques of capitalism and lambasting bourgeois conceptions of art, as Solanas’s play does.

It was a copy of this 1967 SCUM Book edition of the play that punk rock journalist turned cineaste Mary Harron (and her intrepid research assistant Diane Tucker) unearthed while researching the film I Shot Andy Warhol (1996). Harron incorporated scenes from Up Your Ass into the biopic’s plot, treating audiences to what she thought was the world’s first look at the comedy that had such tragic consequences for Warhol.107 Harron’s rich and remarkably entertaining film deserves the credit for recovering a play many people believed was lost. Her movie generated renewed scholarly interest in Solanas and led to a fully staged production of Up Your Ass in 2000–2001 by director George Coates.108 Unfortunately, however, I Shot Andy Warhol perpetuated many fallacies about the author’s personal life and artistic exploits—including the notion that the play was written in 1967, around the same time if not after SCUM Manifesto, and that Solanas penned it with Warhol in mind. More important, the movie reinforced misconceptions and mistaken beliefs about the role Up Your Ass played in the assassination at-
Cover of Valerie Solanas’s first SCUM Book (1967) containing a typeset version of her play *Up Your Ass* (1965), issued with a reprint of her article “A Young Girl’s Primer on How to Attain the Leisure Class,” from *Cavalier* magazine (1966). (Image courtesy of Hofstra University Library Special Collections.)
tempt, namely, that Valerie shot Andy because he lost her only copy of the play. This theory was bolstered when a misplaced trunk belonging to Billy Name (né Linich), the photographer responsible for the Factory's silver design, yielded, buried beneath an array of old lighting equipment, the script for *Up Your Ass*. The document was nearly identical to the one Harron and Tucker found (in the collection of an erotica dealer), and both were missing both the front and back covers. The obvious conclusion, everyone agreed, was that Name found the *copy* Warhol lost while Harron and Tucker had tracked down Valerie's *original* manuscript or, as they dubbed it, “The Holy Grail.”

Two recent treatments of Solanas by Martin Puchner and James Harding take embellished accounts of *Up Your Ass* and Valerie’s relationship with Warhol from Harron’s fictionalized film as historic fact. In *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes*, Puchner cites *Up Your Ass* as exemplary of what he calls the “manifesto–performance theory nexus” of modern aesthetics. Adopting the chronology of events that Harron charts in her biopic, he concludes that *Up Your Ass* is “an enactment of the *SCUM Manifesto*,” that it “was written in conjunction with the manifesto” and “takes terms and figures from the *SCUM Manifesto* and turns them into characters.” In actuality, the play was written two years before *SCUM*. Rather than exemplifying Puchner’s theory, Solanas provides an interesting counterexample to his assertion that the manifesto is the paradigmatic genre of performance through which modern cultures have articulated their revolutionary ambitions and desires.

Whereas Puchner finds Solanas representative of dominant paradigms at play in the historical avant-garde, James Harding argues the inverse, that Valerie’s “radically subversive project aimed at recalibrating the trajectory of the American avantgarde.” In “The Simplest Surrealist Act,” he reads the shooting of Warhol as “a carefully orchestrated and radically disturbing aesthetic performance” that turned “the tropes of the avantgarde against itself.” Harding calls *Up Your Ass* “adolescent and contrived” and states that the script “is perhaps best understood as a provocation than a work of dramatic literature.” For him, the play has little merit aside from its function as “an allegorical parallel” to the assassination attempt. This theory is based on the willful misreading of *Up Your Ass* as a play “about a woman who ‘is a man-hating hustler and panhandler’ and who, somewhat more successfully than Solanas, actually ends up killing a man.” Harding cites as evidence the meme that there are two different versions of the play—one in which
a woman kills a man and one in which a mother strangles her son—rather than following the plot of the actual script, which is excerpted alongside his article. *Up Your Ass* is not about a *woman* who shoots a *man* but a *mother* who commits *infanticide*, and the homicidal female in question is *not* Solanas’s alter ego, Bongi Perez; it is Mrs. Arthur Hazlett.\textsuperscript{116}

As I have demonstrated, there are two versions of the play, one published and one not, but their content is identical. I have also proven that Solanas did not write this play for Warhol or even with him in mind as a potential producer. The play Andy lost was the 1965 unpublished version of *Up Your Ass*, which Valerie wrote in California. This could not have been the *only* copy of the play, as Solanas sold the script on the streets and through ads in the *Village Voice*. The discovery of a copy of the 1967 version of the play in Billy Name’s trunk suggests that Valerie remained on good enough terms with Warhol and his entourage to entrust someone at the Factory with at least one copy of the published edition of the play. This also proves that *Up Your Ass* was written before *SCUM Manifesto* and that the latter is based on the former, not the other way around.

This “smoking gun” was “hiding” in plain sight for forty years at the Library of Congress.\textsuperscript{117} It never occurred to Harron and Tucker (or, in all fairness, to anyone else) to search for copies of *Up Your Ass* in libraries, not even after they recovered the script, which boasts both a publisher’s imprimatur (which I discuss at length in the next section) and multiple copyright dates. As fate would have it, there were at least four copies of the 1967 SCUM Book edition of the play in special collections of university archives during the time Harron and Tucker were searching for *Up Your Ass*. The University of Virginia acquired the play sometime between 1964 and 1977, Hofstra obtained it in 1971, Indiana owns a copy but has no record of its acquisition date, and the University of Arizona had an edition that was lost and paid for in 2003 (“lost” by a would-be SCUM insurgent, no doubt—one I am fairly certain I could identify). I can say with absolute certainty that Solanas did not shoot Warhol because he lost her play, but whether she tried to kill him because he refused to produce it is another matter entirely.

“I dedicate this play to ME”

On February 15, 1967, less than a week after Solanas published and copyrighted the SCUM Book edition of *Up Your Ass*, she produced a multieve-
ning staged reading of the play at the Directors’ Theater at 20 E. 14th Street in the East Village. This off-off-Broadway playhouse was located in the same building as the Free University of New York (FUNY), where Solanas took classes and guest lectured for Paul Krassner. Its leader was Bob Brady, who taught acting and directing at the School of Visual Arts. Brady, who is best known for his role in the cult classic B-movie Liquid Sky (1982), had rather unorthodox pedagogical methods, which included, among other things, recruiting homeless people from the streets to act in romantic scenes with his students.118 This may be how Solanas first encountered Brady. According to performer and playwright Norman Marshal, who worked as a paid professional actor in Brady’s directing courses, Solanas took part in at least two classes in 1967.119

That Solanas invested a great deal, emotionally and financially, in this staged reading is evidenced by the fact that she took out a series of ads, over a four-week period, in both the theatre and the book sections of the Village Voice to promote the performance and the script. The first ad for a “pre-production reading” of “UP FROM THE SLIME” appeared on February 2, 1967.120 It was positioned just below an obituary for Joe Cino’s lover Jonathan Torrey and immediately to the right of a notice for the critically acclaimed happening Snows by Carolee Schneemann (who would, years later, write a moving elegy for Valerie titled “Solanas in a Sea of Men”).121 A second ad, placed on February 9, appeared just above a notice for The Playhouse of the Ridiculous Repertory Club, Inc., which was showing Charles Ludlam’s Big Hotel and two shorts by Ron Tavel, The Life of Juanita Castro and Kitchenette.122 A third notice, printed February 16, included a cast list for the show and an announcement that Solanas would be appearing on Randy Wicker’s WBAI-FM radio program.123 The ad reads:

SCUM
(Society for Cutting Up Men)
presents
pre-production reading of
UP FROM THE SLIME
by Valerie Solanas

Beg. Wed. Feb 15. 8:30 PM
every day except Tues. & Thurs.
Directors Theater School 20 E. 14th St.
admission by contribution
Cast (in alphabetical order)
Harold Anderson,
Donald Eggena, Bonnie Greer,
Marcia Sam Ridge,
Gary Tucker, Barbara Wallace
copies of SCUM book ()
“Up from the Slime” & “A Young
Girl’s Primer on How To Attain to
the Leisure Class”
(reprinted from Cavalier 1966)
will be sold at reading for
$1.50 per copy

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Listen to Valerie Solanas on
Randy Wicker’s Interview Show
WBAI-FM in a few weeks
(watch Village Voice for exact date)\textsuperscript{124}

The only names in this cast list likely to resonate with theater enthusiasts are Gary Tucker and Bonnie Greer. At the time of Solanas’s production, Tucker was a member of The Play-house of the Ridiculous, which he would soon leave with Ludlam to form the Ridiculous Theatrical Company. In 1971 Tucker moved to Chicago, where, under the pseudonym Eleven, he founded and directed the Godzilla Rainbow Troupe. A short-lived but influential collective, Godzilla, in the words of Albert Williams, “lived up to its name. It was monstrous and beautiful; it breathed fire and gave off a glowing wet afterglow; it had a hell of an impact, and it was gone almost as soon as it had started.”\textsuperscript{125} Carrying the torch of the theater of the ridiculous, the troupe became notorious for its scatological content, cross-gender casting, graphic nudity, and campy sense of humor. Their inaugural show was Bill Vehr’s Whores of Babylon, which was followed by Turds in Hell (written by Vehr and Ludlam).\textsuperscript{126} Bonnie Greer may or may not be the highly acclaimed African American actress and playwright associated with the Actors Studio and the Negro Ensemble Company who moved to London in 1986 and was recently honored with an Order of the British Empire. I have been unable to confirm or deny that this Bonnie Greer, who would have been nineteen in 1967, is the person in Solanas’s cast list.
Advertisement in the February 16, 1967, issue of the Village Voice theater section announcing a pre-production reading of Valerie Solanas’s play, Up from the Slime (aka Up Your Ass) at the Directors’ Theater in New York City, including a cast list and press for an upcoming radio show.
The Lortell Off-Broadway Database lists a Harold Anderson in a 1964 production of *Finis for Oscar Wilde* by one Reverend Edward A. Molloy at the Blackfriar’s Guild Theatre. Neither Anderson nor Donald Eggena enjoyed a very distinguished acting career, but the latter was clearly a skilled entertainer. In 1971 he opened Lend-a-Hand Personnel Service, which offered a variety of services—from dog walking to gourmet catering—to luminaries such as Lauren Bacall and Tony Bennett. Staffed by unemployed actors, Eggena’s operation featured a crew of livelier, better-looking temps than other agencies, which gave Lend-a-Hand a competitive edge, not to mention a number of nods in high-profile places such as *New York* magazine. For whatever reason, this esteemed publication tracked many of Eggena’s entrepreneurial activities, including his purchase of eighty-five pairs of Joan Crawford’s false eyelashes for $325, which he sold for $30 a pop.\textsuperscript{127} The only female member of the cast that I have positively identified is Marcia Sam Ridge, who at the time of the production worked at Paul Krassner’s *The Realist* as an administrative assistant or, as she titled her position, “the Shit-On.”\textsuperscript{128} Ridge described her job as the lowest on the totem pole, lower even than a secretary, or “scapegoat,” as *The Realist’s* Sheila Campion dubbed her office.\textsuperscript{129} Did Marcia play one of the two “shit-on” women in the play, Ginger or Mrs. Arthur Hazlett? Or did she strut her stuff as Bongi Perez? How I would love to know.

The quantity, quality, and content of these ads show how dedicated Solanas was to this play, how hard she worked peddling her *Ass* all over New York, and how confident she was about its future. The designation of this show at the Directors’ Theater as a “pre-production reading of UP FROM THE SLIME” suggests that the February run was a prelude to a larger event. Archival research indicates that she discussed with Warhol the possibility of producing the play at Grove Press’s Evergreen Theatre in 1967. At the time Warhol made this alleged pact with Solanas, he was engaged in contract negotiations with Grove over *a: A Novel*, which it published in 1968. The press’s Evergreen Theatre, named after its literary journal *Evergreen Review*, showed both theatrical productions and movies, including the Factory film in which Solanas starred, *I, a Man*.\textsuperscript{130} A letter in the Warhol Museum archives states that Andy was ready to mount a two-part dramatic production of Solanas’s work, the first being a staged version of her panhandling article, the second being the play itself.\textsuperscript{131} The letter goes so far as to detail the fact that *Up Your Ass* was too short for a full production, so “A Young Girl’s Primer,” in dramatic form, was to be used as a lead-in. According to this document, Warhol, after learning that Solanas had signed a book con-
tract with Olympia Press, changed his mind, became vague, and did nothing more about the production despite his former enthusiasm.

On or around August 15, 1967, Solanas received a five-hundred-dollar advance from Maurice Girodias at Olympia Press to write two novels. Girodias, a publisher of modernist literature and erotica, including Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, William S. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, Pauline Réage's *Story of O*, and Samuel Beckett's trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*), was intrigued by Solanas. He recalls:

> Her manner was friendly, lively, and she had a sense of humor—which somewhat took the edge off the anti-masculine doctrine she proceeded to preach to me. The title of her play, *Up Your Ass*, was sufficiently indicative of her iconoclastic disposition. . . . The play was rather clever, and I found it amusingly wild.\(^\text{132}\)

Unable to or uninterested in fulfilling the contract for Girodias, Solanas granted him permission, in the spring of 1968, to publish *SCUM Manifesto*, which Olympia Press put into production only after the shooting in order to capitalize on the publicity it generated.\(^\text{133}\)

Sensing that Warhol's interest in *Up Your Ass* was waning, Solanas pitched the play to other producers. She terrified the Roundabout Theatre's Gene Feist (a classmate of Warhol's at Carnegie Tech) when she barged into his office unannounced, introduced herself, and threw a copy of her script onto his desk. “The lady was a lunatic,” Feist recalls.

> People who are either severely ill or have been institutionalized get this kind of sexless, dumb look, an oxen look. That's what she had. I was getting more and more alarmed—here I was a natural born coward, and it was obvious she was insane. “I'm sorry we only do the classics,” I said. She took her script and left. I locked the door and breathed a sigh of relief, and as soon as I calmed down, you know the first thing I thought? I should have told her to go see Andy. She had a threatening presence. But Andy felt crazy people were gifted. Anyway, that was that.\(^\text{134}\)

Feist's memory of how menacing Solanas was may be accurate, but the fact that he recalls the play being titled *Up Your Ass with a Meathook* and the fact that he interjects Warhol into the story lead me to believe that his recollection of this encounter may be embellished, or perhaps influenced by the violence Valerie would soon perpetrate against Andy.
What this account makes perfectly clear, however, is that Solanas tried to apply the same rules of engagement she used in panhandling—namely, aggressively and sarcastically harassing passersby until they gave in to her demands—to the art of contract negotiations. While the adoption of a menacing posture may have scared many people into donating a dime, a quarter, or even a dollar to her tip jar, this tactic, not surprisingly, failed to attract patrons willing to pony up hundreds of dollars to produce her work. While I admire Solanas because she was a politically astute, artistically daring dramatist who refused to compromise or acquiesce to make herself more acceptable to mainstream society, I have to wonder how her life (and, by extension, history) might have played out differently had she mastered the art of subtlety, which is a necessary skill for anyone who wants to attract a producer, not to mention an audience.

Solanas came very close to securing a fully realized production of her play in the fall of 1967. “The Cino might have been the fountainhead of feminist theatre if not for my prudery,” laments Robert Patrick. “Charles Stanley begged me to direct a play by a fetid, somehow fetal woman who wandered in. But I found its coprophagic theme disgusting, so Valerie Solanis [sic] took Up Your Ass elsewhere, to Andy Warhol, whom she shot for not producing it.” This agonizing admission lies buried under the heading “Issues: Uncategorized” on Patrick’s extensive Internet archive documenting the birthplace of off-off-Broadway. Patrick has expressed deep remorse over his refusal to stage the play: “I . . . regret not directing it, not only because of its importance, but because I have the grandiose idea that if I had, I might have saved Mister Warhol’s life.” Patrick does not remember when or under what circumstances he first met Valerie. “I only remember coming into the Cino one afternoon and seeing her standing there looking just like Ms. [Lili] Taylor [who played Solanas in Mary Harron’s I Shot Andy Warhol]. Mister Stanley introduced us and gave me the play. Ms. Solanis [sic] left. I am sure she said something, but nothing that I remember.” Patrick may be a southern gentleman, but he is no prude; while his revulsion over Solanas may have prevented him from seeing the merit in what he correctly intimates is a landmark feminist play, his rejection of Up Your Ass had little bearing on, and certainly no causal relationship to, Valerie’s attempted assassination of Warhol the following June.

Caffe Cino was not a place for lesbians. Despite its reputation as a queer utopia, the Caffe promoted theater that was, for the most part, by and for gay men, most of whom had little time or interest in dykes like Solanas. The queens of Cornelia Street may have fawned over conventionally attractive fe-
males like Bernadette Peters and Mary Woronov, but they had little patience with (or stomach for) gender nonconforming women with a radical feminist agenda. There were some lesbians at Cino, including playwright Claris Nelson (née Erickson) and director Roberta Sklar, but they did not write or stage work that was as brazen as *Up Your Ass*. Only two people at Cino exhibited any degree of tolerance for or interest in Solanas: Charles Stanley and Magie Dominic. “I can’t remember how I met Valerie,” recalled Dominic. “She was like the Caffe. One day she was suddenly there.” In her memoir *The Queen of Peace Room*, she writes, “Joe Cino and Valerie Solanas were alike in some ways. People saw what they needed. A Rorschach test.” Dominic certainly saw something in Solanas, for they had a brief affair. “Valerie and I slept together on two occasions,” she notes in her memoir. “At her room in the Chelsea Hotel. Valerie was the only woman I slept with in the ’60s. We never called it forbidden love. We just called it sleeping together. And we did. In each other’s arms like two old tired women.” Dominic recalls a particularly intimate and loving exchange with Valerie. “Someone should write a play about you,” she told Magie, “and call it *Cleopatra*.”

This remembrance is one of the few records I have found of an affectionate encounter between Valerie and another human being. Dominic is the rare witness to Solanas’s tenderness and vulnerability, but she was also acutely aware of the playwright’s volatile temperament and propensity for violence. “I think if people had tried to harm me while I was with Valerie,” Dominic writes in her autobiography, “she would have killed them with her bare hands.” Solanas asked Magie if they could become roommates (something Valerie asked almost everyone—those she slept with and those she did not). “She was having trouble at her hotel and wanted to stay with me at my hotel room,” Dominic remembers. “I said a difficult no. [After Joe Cino’s death] I didn’t know how to cope with anyone anymore.” Solanas told Magie she was having some sort of dispute with the Factory. “She was afraid Warhol was going to steal her idea,” Dominic writes, “It was during this time that Valerie kept phoning the Caffe wanting Charles to produce her play.”

Charles Stanley, a dancer, writer, and actor best remembered for his exploration of genderfuck in H. M. Koutoukas’s *Medea or Maybe the Stars May Understand or Veiled Stranger (a ritualistic camp)*, was perhaps Solanas’s greatest champion. Patrick recalls, “when I refused to do the play, I remember only him literally thrashing about in anger, repeating over and over that it was an important play. I never understood why he did not direct it himself.” By all reports Stanley was so overwhelmed by the administra-
tive demands of the Caffe, in the wake of Joe Cino’s amphetamine-fueled suicide (which coincided with an influx of hopped-up Factory habitués at the Caffe), that he was too busy to take an active role in staging productions.\textsuperscript{148} What he lacked in administrative skills, Stanley made up for in artistic vision and political daring. During his brief tenure as Caffe Cino manager, he pushed the envelope at the already cutting edge venue. Stanley was less interested in work that promoted dignified portraits of gays or presented positive images of homosexuality than he was in exploring deviant desires, sexual fetishes, and internalized homophobia. Had he remained at the helm, Stanley might have produced Solanas’s \textit{Up Your Ass}. In December of 1967, however, he was relieved of his duties, and the Caffe closed for several weeks as a new administrative team took over.

A “SCUMMY Thing”

The \textit{Village Voice} ads tell us a great deal about Solanas’s plans for \textit{Up Your Ass}, but they also provide insight into SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men). Indicative of Valerie’s audacity and mentality agility is her transformation of \textit{scum}, a slur hurled at her repeatedly from the time she was a girl, from an insult into an aesthetic. Solanas resignified this four-letter word, changing it from an epithet into a badge of courage that she donned with defiance, determination, and pride. The promotional materials for the “pre-production reading” of the play begin, “SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) presents,” and the announcements for the sale of the script (published separately in the same issues of the \textit{Voice}) read, “SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) Book.” These ads indicate that Solanas conceived of SCUM as a “literary trope” under whose imprimatur she published and promoted her creative work long before she envisioned it as an activist organization or the title of a political tract.\textsuperscript{149} In February of 1967, when Solanas published \textit{Up Your Ass} as a SCUM Book, she had neither written nor conceived of \textit{SCUM Manifesto}. The creation of this notorious document was something of an afterthought.

When Solanas realized that she could not beg, borrow, or steal her way into the male-dominated art world, she set about to create her own scene. Unable to find an audience for her play, she attempted to create one by placing ads in the \textit{Village Voice} that she hoped would attract like-minded people. In the March 30 edition of the weekly newspaper, she printed the following announcement in the public notice section.
SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) is being formed to eliminate through sabotage all aspects of society that are not relevant to women (everything), to dispose of the garbage pail that men have made of the world*** to effect a complete female take-over, to end the production of males (It’s now technically possible to reproduce without the aid of males and to produce only females) and to begin to create a swinging, groovy, out-of-sight female world. SCUM has a men’s auxiliary to accommodate those men who wish to perform a public service and hasten their inevitable demise. If you’d like to work to help end this hard, grim, static, boring male world & wipe the ugly, leering male face off the map, send your name and address to Valerie Solanas, Box Office 47, NY 14.

***war, money, marriage, and prostitution, work, prevention of automation, niceness, politeness, clean language, “dignity,” censorship, trivial “entertainment,” secrecy, suppression of knowledge & ideas, ignorance, fatherhood & mental illness (fear, cowardice, timidity, humility, insecurity, passivity), authority, government, boredom, monotony, “Great Art,” “Culture,” philosophy, religion, morality based on sex, competition, prestige, status, formal education, prejudice (racial, ethnic, religious, etc.), social, economic classes, domesticity, motherhood, materialism, sexuality, ugliness, destruction of cities, poisoning of air, hate, contempt, distrust, prevention of conversation, friendship & love, isolation, suburbs, violence, disease & death.

With this ad, Solanas attempted to create a mailing list of militant, fun-loving, radical feminist guerrillas and their male allies whom she might persuade to produce, attend, or purchase Up Your Ass or other work.

One month later Solanas ran an ad in the Village Voice announcing a gathering of the Society for Cutting Up Men.

Valerie Solanas
SCUM
Fri., April 28. 8:30 PM/Farband House 575 6th Avenue (at 16th) Men 2.50, women $1.00

The fact that Solanas is charging admission suggests to me that this event was some kind of performance. This is supported by a transcribed conversation between her and Warhol in which Solanas tries to recruit Andy for the men’s auxiliary. In this exchange, she describes SCUM “as some sort of forum—except it wouldn’t be exactly a forum—there’s no word for this, I mean, it
Announcement in the Village Voice on May 18, 1967, for a SCUM Forum conducted by Valerie Solanas at the Directors' Theater. This is the first known advertisement for the sale of SCUM Manifesto, which, in this iteration, consisted of a single-page flier.

doesn't fall into any place or occasion. I don’t know what to call it. Just a SCUMMY thing. You know, sort of—not really a lecture—except that there’d be a lot of interaction with the audience. Solanas harnessed the power of performance to create a novel and, as we shall see, utterly ingenious social, political, and aesthetic form she called a “SCUMMY thing.”

On May 23, 1967, one month after the Farband House gathering, Solanas staged a “SCUMMY thing” at the Directors’ Theater, where she had held the “pre-production” reading of Up Your Ass. Solanas billed this event as a “SCUM Forum, explaining how and why SCUM (Society for Cutting Up Men) will eliminate [the] male sex.” The price of admission is the same as the previous SCUM event, $2.50 for men and $1.00 for women. This notice includes what I believe to be the first ad for SCUM Manifesto, listed as $1.00. This first edition of the manifesto consisted of a single page flier with the text of the March 30th Village Voice ad and the drawing of the bird-flipping hand coming “up from the slime” that graces the cover of the SCUM Book edition of Up Your Ass. That Solanas refers to this version of the manifesto as a “recruiting poster” in conversations with Warhol, offers further evidence that her primary motivation was to generate an audience for her performances.

I believe the motivation to create SCUM Manifesto had less to do with an attempt to earn a few extra bucks or the desire to articulate a revolutionary political theory than it did with the fallout from a disastrous appearance on a popular television program. On the bottom of this first edition of the manifesto, which was clearly created to promote the “SCUMMY thing” at the Directors’ Theater on May 23, Solanas includes the following statement.

Valerie Solanas, because she was kicked off the Alan Burke Show (to be shown Sat., May 20) for “talking dirty” after only fifteen minutes on and prevented from fully explaining to the public how and why SCUM will eliminate the male sex, will conduct a SCUM Forum.
It is immediately after being humiliated by Burke that Solanas decides to create a manifesto, and even so, her aim is the generation of an audience for her live event, not the elaboration of a political tract. Valerie came to this project the way she lived her life, impulsively, reacting viscerally and violently to life's indignities and people's intolerance.

Solanas continued to develop the manifesto, in and through performances of her “SCUMMY things,” over the course of the next few months. In a letter to Warhol dated August 1, 1967 (written between the filming of *I, a Man* and its premier), Solanas states that she is almost finished with *SCUM Manifesto* and that she intends to sell it on the street within days. She asks Andy if he would like to film some of the SCUM Forums and outdoor rallies that she is planning in conjunction with the *Manifesto*’s launch. The world will be corroded with SCUM, Solanas promises him, noting that she has already had a large and positive response to the draft of the *Manifesto* she published in the *Village Voice* and that the majority of respondents were male.³⁵⁴ Later that fall, she brings up the issue again. She tells Andy that her SCUMMY things are very successful, and by successful she means that they are popular; they aren't well known, she tells Warhol, but they are popular.³⁵⁵

A brilliant, caustic, and satirical analysis of the cesspool men have made of the world, the *Manifesto* is more than a performative genre advancing a SCUM aesthetic. Like *SCUM Book*, which consists of a play and a dramatic monologue, *SCUM Manifesto* is a script for a production. Solanas's sister told me Valerie's “intent, at the time was to have various people read from the manifesto.”³⁵⁶ This is confirmed by the fact that Solanas submitted her manifesto to a variety of off-off-Broadway venues, including the Directors’ Theater and Judson Poets’ Theatre, as a play.³⁵⁷ Undeterred by rejection from these two locations, Solanas tried alternative venues, including Café Bizarre, an edgy Village coffeehouse on West Third that Bob Dylan made famous. A former coach house, Bizarre was “seedy, loud, a haven for hitter-chicks, the kind who’d take you home for the night without asking you your name and number, tolerant of rock-n-roll, off-beat, and off-limits to the tourist.”³⁵⁸ Another site Solanas considered was the Electric Circus, a popular East Village dance club and pleasure dome that featured a variety of entertainment from experimental theater and circus performers to light shows and cinematic projections.

As she had since 1965, Solanas continued to hustle Warhol, hoping that he would finance one of her productions for a cut of the profits. A transcript in the Warhol Museum archives documents negotiations between the artists
in the fall of 1967. From the casualness of the conversation, the number of jokes the two trade, and the range of topics they discuss, it is clear that Solanas and Warhol were on friendly terms and had been for quite some time. It is also clear that Valerie harbored no delusions of—or any desire to be—one of his superstars. After lighthearted banter and being interrupted by a number of people waltzing in and out of the Factory, the conversation takes a serious turn about their work.

Solanas tells Andy she’s been selling *SCUM Manifesto* and working on a couple of new projects, including a novel and a nonfiction book. She asks him if he’s been promoting SCUM during his college lecture tour, as he promised he would. Warhol insists he has. Valerie then tells Andy of her conversation with the owner of Café Bizarre about staging a “SCUMMY thing” there and of her plans to talk with the owner of the Electric Circus, where she knows she could negotiate a percentage of the cover charge. She says the problem she’s having is a lack of funds; she does not have the money to advertise or promote the show. Solanas asks Warhol if he’d finance a production, adding that naturally he would get a cut of the proceeds. Rather than dismissing Valerie or changing the subject, Warhol engages her in a conversation about specifics, including the kind of financial investment she has in mind and the logistics of the event: where it would take place, when, how frequently, and what his investment would be. Solanas tells Andy that he should partner with her because he would not only make money off the deal but would garner great publicity for *I, a Man*. She adds that she’s been telling everybody she talks to, including Randy Wicker at WBAI, that he’s going to produce and direct *Up Your Ass*. Warhol’s next statement suggests that he not only takes Solanas seriously but he is familiar enough with her work to believe that it might serve as a suitable project for his newest “It” girl. You know Candy Cane, Andy asks Valerie. Yes, she replies. He’s the drag queen one who looks like Joan Bennett. Well, we’ll talk to Paul Morrissey about it Warhol says.

“The Big Suck”

Somehow, some way, negotiations between Solanas and Warhol and Solanas and Girodias went terribly awry, and in her mind they were not only related but part of a vast conspiracy by powerful men to steal her work and cheat her out of money and fame. On June 3, 1968, Valerie entered the Factory on Union Square armed with two pistols and shot Andy at point-blank
range, along with two of his associates, Mario Amaya and Fred Hughes (who
dodged a bullet when Valerie’s gun jammed). Girodias is believed by many
to have been the target that day. An analysis of the “long involved story” that
led Solanas to shoot that saintly satanic prince of pop lies beyond the scope
of this inquiry. Whatever the shootings reflect—a desperate bid for fame,
a desire for revenge, a paranoid schizophrenic breakdown, the demented
logic of psychosis—they most certainly do not exemplify the deconstructive
logic of parody embodied in Solanas’s performance texts. In other words,
while the assassination attempt may have been a carefully plotted (though
ultimately botched) production, it was not a “SCUMMY thing” acting out
the tenets of her manifesto, as Harding and others have suggested.

As far as Girodias was concerned, Solanas was crazy or paranoid or both.
“Obviously,” he wrote, “the pixies were moving in, pretty fast.” No other
explanation made “any sense since she had nothing that anyone would want
to steal.” Was Solanas insane to think that the most famous artist of the
twentieth century would want to stage her plays? Was it delirium that made
her feel her scripts were valuable enough not only to publish, copyright, and
produce but also to steal? Was it crazy for this intelligent, acerbic, fiercely
ambitious, ass-peddling, penniless dyke to consider herself an artist? Was
it madness that engendered Solanas’s profane political imaginary, her auda-
cious alter ego Bongi Perez, and her scatological sense of humor? Was it lu-
nacy? Perhaps. But it was certainly ludicrous. What is even more ludicrous
than this dyke’s ballyhoo gestures is the fact that had she not shot Warhol there
might not have been a radical feminist movement.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, an American socialist who was in Mexico City on
her way to Cuba, glimpsed, out of the corner of her eye, a newspaper head-
line proclaiming, “Super-Woman Power Advocate Shoots Andy Warhol.”
“[T]hrilled” by the idea that “a woman shot a man because he was using
her,” Dunbar-Ortiz believed this was a sign that “finally women were rising
up.” Hopping the first plane back to the States, she “planned to form—or
find and join—a female liberation movement” with “warrior women” and
to “find Valerie Solanas and defend her.” By the time Dunbar-Ortiz
landed in Manhattan in August, two rogue members of NOW, veteran civil
rights activist Florynce Kennedy and New York chapter president Ti-Grace
Atkinson, had already installed themselves as Solanas’s counsel. The former
dubbed Valerie “one of the most important spokeswomen for the feminist
movement,” while the latter proclaimed, “She has dragged feminism kicking
and screaming into the 20th Century, in a very dramatic way.”

In a press release delivered on June 13, just hours after her initial meet-
ing with Solanas, Atkinson made the “first public use of the concept of ‘radical feminist’” in describing her client’s political program. Incensed by these events, Betty Friedan fired off this telegram to Atkinson and Kennedy.

DESIST IMMEDIATELY FROM LINKING NOW IN ANY WAY WITH VALERIE SOLANAS MISS SOLANAS MOTIVES IN WARHOL CASE ENTIRELY IRRELEVANT TO NOW’S GOALS OF FULL EQUALITY FOR WOMEN IN TRULY EQUAL PARTNERSHIP WITH MEN.

Ignoring Friedan’s order that they drop the Solanas case, Ti-Grace and Flo continued to advocate for Valerie. The issue caused a major rift in the ranks of NOW, as a mass exodus of feminists, including Atkinson and Kennedy, fled in the liberal wing of the women’s movement in search of more militant organizations advancing the kind of revolutionary agenda they understood Solanas to be advocating.

Solanas had endured painful ostracism from aesthetic and political movements until she shot Warhol and was hailed as a hero by a handful of extremists. Although she desperately desired the attention, admiration, and camaraderie, Solanas’s longing for recognition and community were overshadowed by her fear (however irrational) that any attention she received would only benefit Warhol and publicize Olympia Press’s version of her Manifesto, which it rushed into production in the fall of 1968 to capitalize on the shooting. Valerie maintained, to her death, that Girodias’s edition was a crass and opportunistic bastardization of her art. Solanas grew increasingly ambivalent about the political changes her actions inspired, in part because she felt her ideas were being misunderstood and misrepresented by both her detractors and her supporters. In fact, she came to see the embrace of SCUM by radical feminists as disingenuous and predatory. After she was released from jail, she engaged in vicious and protracted battles with leaders of the women’s liberation movement (in Majority Report and other print publications) over feminists’ use, and in her eyes abuse, of her manifesto.

What Solanas wanted to talk about was not SCUM but Up Your Ass. This surprised Dunbar-Ortiz, who prior to meeting Solanas imagined her as “a martyr for all women everywhere.” After spending three hours with her in jail in August 1968, Dunbar-Ortiz came to see Valerie in a different light. In a letter to a friend, she wrote:
What a mind Valerie has. I can guarantee she is not a violent person, nor
is she anti-male. She is angry and she is Anti-Man. . . . I think of her more
as Rimbaud than Ché, and I don’t think she will ever be a revolutionary in
the left political sense. Perhaps destroyers like her can never transform their
energy, but only inspire others.170

Years later Dunbar-Ortiz would recall that Solanas spent the majority of
their meeting talking about her play. In what was likely the final perfor-
manence of the Theater of the Ludicrous, Solanas acted out *Up Your Ass* for
Dunbar-Ortiz and her comrade Dana Densmore in the visitors’ room at the
Matteawan State Hospital for the criminally insane in Beacon, New York.
Not only did Valerie “reconstruct the whole play from memory,” but she
gave distinct voices to each of the different characters.171

By the time Solanas was released from prison in 1971 (she was charged
with assault, sentenced to three years for the shootings, and given credit for
time served), the movement had moved on, and she was no longer a central
player in the drama of women’s liberation. Solanas tried to stage a comeback
by republishing (an authorized edition of) *SCUM Manifesto* in 1977, but the
“treatment” she received from the “correctional” system, made her worse in-
stead of better. Mentally unstable and in poor physical health, Solanas died
in 1988 at the Hotel Bristol, a welfare residence in San Francisco’s Tender-
loin District, a neighborhood that bears a striking resemblance to (and may
very well be) the scummy setting of *Up Your Ass*. It is not surprising that
Valerie drifted back into a state of abject obscurity from whence she once
rose “up from the slime,” nor is it surprising that this play remained hidden,
or should I say repressed, for so long, tearing as it does at the conceptual
fabric of American society and the contingent foundations of patriarchal
culture. Scandalous even today in its insolence and seditiousness, Solanas’
picaresque political aesthetic makes the contemporary LGBT agenda seem
ludicrous by comparison.