

Cultural Daily

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Remembering Tom Wolfe, and the New York Moment

Jerry Kavanagh · Wednesday, May 23rd, 2018

One of the pleasures of working at *New York* magazine in the 1970s (and there were many) was the annual Christmas party, held in the editorial offices on the third floor at 755 Second Avenue. That was a comfortable setup for the edit and art departments. *New York* published weekly, except for a double issue the last two weeks in December. That week without a press deadline was liberating, and the staff reveled in the temporary stress-free period. We could work ahead to prepare for the new year, and then willingly stay late to enjoy the party in *New York's* city room layout.

In the festive spirit of the season, we even tolerated the presence in our midst of the Mad Men and Mad Women of the advertising sales offices from the second floor. You see, a few of them would have sold out the editorial in a New York minute for a sales commission. I remember one rep who brashly and unashamedly offered to write capsule restaurant reviews (for publication!) for potential clients she was soliciting. She saw no conflict of interest there, only a fatter paycheck for herself.

It was not uncommon for Mayor Ed Koch and Representative Bella Abzug to join us. One year, Paul Newman showed up. To this day I cannot hear a Johnny Mathis Christmas song without thinking of my former colleague Merry Clark, who at the party one year ruefully told me about the moment she realized that Johnny was not singing to her. When I reminded her of that not too long ago, she said, "He's still not singing to me!"

During the course of one of those annual late-night Christmas parties, one booze-fueled contributing writer had a memorable close-up encounter with the magazine's copy machine. I wasn't an eyewitness but I did see the evidence in the form of a stack of black-and-white reproductions that "Around Town" editor Ruth Gilbert kept in the bottom drawer of her desk. As it turned out, it wasn't all that memorable for the contributing writer, who had a hazy recollection of the party. Days later, his anxiety was not assuaged by reassurances from Ruth and her co-conspirator, Merry, that nothing had happened.

I don't recall seeing *New York* contributing editor Tom Wolfe at the party that night, but he would later rewrite the incident in his novel *The Bonfire of the Vanities*.

R.I.P., Tom.

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