

Celebrating the *Other* Art Form

A massive festival reminds viewers that Vancouver is a hotbed for performance art

BY ALEXANDER VARTY

It's easy to imagine Glenn Alteen's face crinkling with mirth when, over the telephone, he retails this hoary old quip: "What do you get when you cross a performance artist with a Mafioso? Someone who makes you an offer you don't understand."

The joke reflects the popular notion that performance art is willfully obscure. In Alteen's hands, however, the jest is stood on its head: what's being mocked is not performance art but the public's misunderstanding of it. Yes, some performance artists are silly, self-obsessed, and vague in their intentions, if not actually incomprehensible. But to the long-time grunt gallery curator, performance is one of the most immediate and accessible of all art forms—and with that in mind he has organized Live at the End of the Century, a massive, month-long celebration of the idiom.

Kicking off with a night of performance-art cabaret at the Vogue Theatre on Friday (October 1), and continuing through 27 other events at 11 different venues, Live at the End of the Century aims to boost the profile of performance art in this city while reminding viewers that, internationally, Vancouver is widely recognized as a hotbed of performance activity.

"Vancouver was kind of where performance started in Canada," Alteen explains, "and it's always had one of the strongest communities, so I just thought it was a way to celebrate that community. What's kind of surprising, though, is how many galleries jumped onboard. I mean, there's 11 galleries, which is quite an amazing number when you consider that less than half of them would program performance art regularly."

His comment points out one of the peculiarities of the local

performance-art scene: although there are dozens of performance artists residing here, many of whom have won international acclaim, official support for the idiom has never been strong. Local officials have been suspicious of performance art ever since one of its earliest proponents, Vincent Trasov, donned a Mr. Peanut costume to run for mayor in the 1974 civic elections—and, as Alteen found out when organizing Live at

Live at the End of the Century

the End of the Century, those attitudes haven't changed much in the intervening quarter-century.

"I remember that when I sat down to talk to the city about our grant last year, they were going 'You're doing a performance-art festival?' " he says. "As far as they were concerned, it was like 'What the hell are you doing?' "

So why is performance art so vilified? Alteen thinks it's because performance artists themselves haven't taken the time to educate their audiences in the subtleties of the medium. "The attitude has basically been, 'We're putting this on; you're looking at it. If you get it, great; if you don't, that's your problem,'" he says. "But what's interesting is that if you go to the Native community, it isn't that vilified. Or look at the phenomenal success of groups like Kiss 'n Tell or Taste This in the lesbian community: wherever they do a performance, they get 300 people. If you look at it that way, you realize that performance art is only marginalized in popular culture; in more marginal cultures, it plays a much more central role."

It's also possible that performance is just too amorphous for popular tastes. Half of the theatre pieces in any given fringe festival



Glenn Alteen, grunt gallery curator and organizer of Live at the End of the Century, says performance art has been vilified—even though it is one of the most immediate and accessible idioms. Mark Mushet photo.

could be repackaged as performance art, for instance, as could musical performances ranging from those of '70s art-punks Tunnel Canary to contemporary superstar Marilyn Manson. There's not much that differentiates avant-garde standup from the monologues of performance artist Marlene Madison, and Satina Saturnina's autoerotic act would go over just as well in some outré sex dungeon as in the relatively staid confines of the Anza Club. Used to art that comes neatly packaged in well-labelled boxes—this is "theatre"; that is "a painting"—the general public may be understandably confused by performances that smear such categories into a lively blur.

It is just this lack of boundaries, however, that gives performance art its strength. Performance is a refuge for those who find a single medium too confining; it's also a haven for those who have some message to impart that the mass media won't touch—and those to whom such avenues are closed.

"When you're looking

at things like theatre, you're looking at a 2,000-year-old history," Alteen says, "whereas performance is barely a hundred years old. And I remember hearing [Native artist] Margo Kane talking about this years ago. She was saying that although she'd worked as an actor and a dancer, performance was the first time she could ever just be on-stage as herself and speak."

This is something that's appealing about performance art for a lot of Native artists, he adds. "It's less strictured. It's able to take traditional culture and mix it with contemporary culture in a way that doesn't all of a sudden say 'No, you can't do that.' Which might be performance art's strongest point: there's never that 'Oh, you can't do that,' which is a problem in a lot of other forms."

Native performers such as Archer Pechawis, Warren Arcan, Aiyana Maracle, Dana Claxton, and Thirza Cuthand aren't the only ones represented in Live at the End of the Century, of

course. There are also sexual explorers such as Kiss 'n Tell's Lizard Jones, video artist Paul Wong, and the aforementioned Satina Saturnina; feminist (or postfeminist) thinkers such as Margaret Dragu, Judy Radul, and Madison; political theorists such as Clint Burnham; and truly uncategorizable creators such as Vancouver's Geoffrey Farmer and Victoria's Sandra Lockwood.

"A carnival of the marginalized," performance art's detractors might scoff, and it would be true enough. But as corporate culture strengthens its grip on our TV sets, radios, and newspapers; as funding for the established arts continues to shrink; and as neoconservative ideology comes to dominate even what passes for leftist political discourse, we are all, increasingly, marginalized. If nothing else, performance art offers the possibility of finding a voice. ■

WHAT: Live at the End of the Century
WHERE: Various venues
WHEN: October 1 to November 6
INFO: 875-9516

Something to sing about

Called on September 23 to Rideau Hall in Ottawa, Vancouver's Diane Loomer returned home last week ecstatic at having been made a member of the Order of Canada. "It was both a tremendous thrill and humbling honour," said Loomer, artistic director of Chor Leoni and the Elektra Women's Choir. "Whether they realize it or not, the

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singers, choirs, choral organizations, and educational institutions that I've been privileged to work with through the years have all had a major part in this. Their shining standard of excellence and committed dedication to the choral culture have brought heightened attention to and interest in my work. There

was along with Jackie Parker [pianist Jon Kimura Parker] and Ben Heppner [celebrated as opera's greatest heldentenor], all of us from British Columbia. I felt really proud to be a Canadian, and in such distinguished company."

Now 59, Loomer was born in Minnesota and moved to Vancouver in 1971. With Morna Edmundson, she founded Elektra in 1987, and in 1992 she established the all-male ensemble Chor Leoni. Both choirs have since won renown for their standard repertoire and music by new composers.

BEATING THE TAXMAN The Gastown Actors Studio has won its first round against Revenue Canada. A judge at the Tax Court of Canada has ruled GAS qualifies as a legitimate postsecondary school and is exempt from paying \$77,674 in GST the tax department claimed was owing to it. Revenue Canada was also ordered to pay GAS's court costs. "This has instilled faith in me again," said Aundrea McDonald, who co-owns GAS with founder Mel Austin-Tuck, after the battle ended last week. "This is a precedent-setting case for an acting school. We got a stamp of approval from a judge saying this is a good school."

Judge T.P. O'Connor supported acting as a unique profession in his decision: "I believe it would be very difficult for a college to issue a certificate saying with absolute certainty that a certain student is competent to act. It is quite another thing to say with certainty that a person is competent to carry on the trade of carpentry, plumbing or other trades."

GAS is preparing for its second round against Revenue Canada, this time to contest its claim that the school owes CPP and EI back payments of about \$90,000 for its instructors.

BREAK-IN GLASS A North Vancouver art gallery is reeling after two break-ins in two days last week. On September 19, burglars stole one \$3,000 glass work by Seattle artist Bill Sargent and several smaller pieces by local artists from the Morgan Dawne Gallery at 220 West Esplanade. September 20, thieves again broke in and took another Sargent piece, but were chased by a nearby BC Rail employee, who was able to recover the artwork. The two break-ins are causing hardship for a gallery that had more than \$100,000 worth of art stolen in September 1998—none of which has been recovered. "Each time we've been hit we've had to do very expensive security upgrades, which means more cost to us," lamented gallery owner Glen Powell. The gallery is asking anyone who may have seen the stolen Sargent piece—a multicoloured, blown-and-sculpted bowl that sits on a pedestal—to call 984-1286.

ON THE MARGINS Sex, drugs, and censorship are at the heart of a forum kicking off the Small Press Action Network's *Generous Margins Four* tonight (September 30) from 7 to 9 p.m. at SFU Harbour Centre. The debate promises to be controversial: *Pushing the Boundaries* features speakers ranging from child-porn crusader Robin Sharpe to Teresa Dulce, editor of a Portland zine for strippers and sex-trade workers. A book fair happens Saturday and Sunday (October 2 and 3) at the WISE Hall. For more information on these and other events, check out www.span.org or call 251-4706.

• DOUGLAS HUGHES AND JANET SMITH