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# In East Van, tour group celebrates a rat's celebrity

By CHRIS DAFOE

Rats may come and rats may go, but art — even rat art — lives on forever.

As a case in point, consider Sniffy the Rat, who made headlines around the world in 1990 when Vancouver artist/provocateur Rick Gibson announced he was going to crush the piebald rodent between two canvas-lined concrete blocks. Sniffy survived the art project — at the last minute, Gibson returned the rented rat to the Aquariums West pet store, where he was purchased by Peter Hamilton of Lifeforce, an animal rights group — only to succumb to a respiratory infection later that year.

But if Sniffy has gone to the great exercise wheel in the sky, he lives on in memory and now, in the form of The 10th Anniversary Sniffy the Rat Bus Tour, which made its first — and possibly last — run Sunday afternoon.

Created by Andrew Laurenson of

Radix Theatre and presented as part of LIVE performance art biennial, the Sniffy tour (motto: "For a little while, the world cared about a rat....") visited a variety of locations associated with Vancouver's most famous rodent, connecting the dots with a multimedia package that offered a wry and revealing look at the media and public furore Gibson provoked and performance art in general, all while sending up that great Vancouver institution, the tour bus.

Tour guide/narrator Ian Ross MacDonald kicked things off with a lament about the sorry fate of the hated and hunted Granville Island rat, accompanied on guitar by Sniffy stand-in Ron Samworth, who was decked out in rat ears and nose. After donning our performance art smocks — bright yellow garbage bags — we were warned about the possible dangers of East Vancouver as the bus headed to the basement apartment just off Knight Street where Gib-

son lived in 1990. Along the way, the on-board television sets offered Sniffy's back story, pieced together from radio and television interviews Gibson did at the time and the reminiscences of those involved in promoting and covering the story. There was even a singalong, a rollicking tribute to rats in general and Sniffy in particular.

One can only imagine what the neighbours thought when they saw 60 people, all dressed in yellow garbage bags, disembark from the tour bus and begin posing for pictures with a tall, thin man dressed as rat. Most seemed to take it stride; while one neighbour peeked nervously from behind the curtains, at another house a dozen children gathered at the window to wave.

Once back on the bus, we were offered a performance art primer from grunt gallery director Glen Alteen and the very amusing film, *22 Short Films About Sniffy*, which illustrated, in pen

and ink drawings, the other ways Sniffy could have met his end. As we passed the old library, the onboard televisions replayed news coverage of Gibson running for his life down Burrard Street pursued by several hundred angry animal lovers. He found refuge in the Hotel Vancouver, but not before running into smack into the hotel's door, an accident reenacted on tape by a Gibson doppelganger.

The tour ended, many laughs and several singalongs later, with drinks at the Railway Club, where, in 1990, Gibson's supporters fled a media horde led by Pamela Wallin.

While Sunday's show was planned as one-off event, it played to a full bus,



PETER BATTISTONI/VANCOUVER SUN FILES

**The late Sniffy the Rat garnered international fame.**

leading Laurenson to suggest that the Sniffy show may ride again. We can only hope. Sniffy may not be what most people have in mind when they talk about cultural tourism, but it's a good deal more fun than another trip to the totem poles in Stanley Park.