

LIVE AND IN YOUR FACE

VANCOUVER'S BIENNIAL PERFORMANCE FESTIVAL CELEBRATES THE WORLD'S MOST INCLUSIVE ART

BY HILARY PEACH AND
ALEXANDER VARTY

If you happen to be passing the YWCA thrift store at Main and 28th on Saturday (October 25), you may notice that the window is filled with large brown paper bags covered in images of women and pieces of text. This is the set for Lori Weidenhammer's improvised performance piece, *One Hundred Housewives*. The women are homemakers—pop-culture icons and members of Weidenhammer's own family—and the text is excerpted from a variety of volumes, such as the Chatelaine Institute's *How to Shop*. During the afternoon performance, Weidenhammer will stand in the window, dip into the bags, and pull out various costume pieces, donning and combining them to create a succession of improvised characters. A hundred housewives in five hours might seem like a lot. But "in the full spectrum of all the different housewives in the world," Weidenhammer says, "a hundred really isn't that many at all." This piece is the first in a series aimed at breaking down stereotypical images of women as perpetuated by pop media. Possible sequels include *One Hundred Evil Babes* and *One Hundred Muses*. Weidenhammer characterizes her piece as a hybrid, a theatrical improvisation set inside a visual-art installation, and she promises that it will be "an endless tickle-trunk romp".

Whether hybrid or new form, wordless playlet or absurdist fashion show, *One Hundred Housewives* is presented as part of the LIVE Biennial of Performance Art, a sprawling series of shows, lectures, and panel discussions being held at a variety of Vancouver venues until November 29. It's possible that the festival will help clarify the debate around the nature of performance art. But it's just as likely that LIVE might leave audiences provoked, enlightened, entertained, enraged, and just as confused as ever, for although Weidenhammer-style humour is not necessarily an integral part of performance art, hybridism is.

Key to the genre, as far as it can be defined, is that it is the most inclusive of all the art forms. It gives its practitioners access to different media without demanding technological complexity; it allows for spontaneity in a way that traditional, text-driven theatre simply can't; and it can express a gentle, almost meditative sensibility that media art only rarely evokes.

"That's pretty close to the mark of what we're trying to hit," says LIVE artistic director David Yonge, who seems just as baffled by performance art's range of expression—and LIVE's broad parameters—as any neophyte. Discussing what separates performance art from new-media work, for instance, he says: "I'm sure those lines are drawn somewhere, but I'm not sure that I could draw them. But

I'm attracted to performance art because of the possibilities to it that are not available in any other medium, and that's what we're hoping to get across." And when asked if any themes are emerging within the context of the festival, he begs to defer judgment until it's all over.

"I can sort of picture what's going to happen, but until I actually go and watch all the shows I don't know if I could actually say what themes there might be. We have, like, 46 different events, and there is something that links all of them, but I don't know what it is yet."

Amorphousness, imprecision, an expansive nature—again, we come back to the notion of hybridism. Allen Fisher, an English academic, poet, and painter who will give a Kootenay School of Writing-sponsored reading at Artspeak on November 18, observes that artistic openness is perhaps inevitable in a medium so dependent on a network of collaborators, acquaintances, and friendly venues.

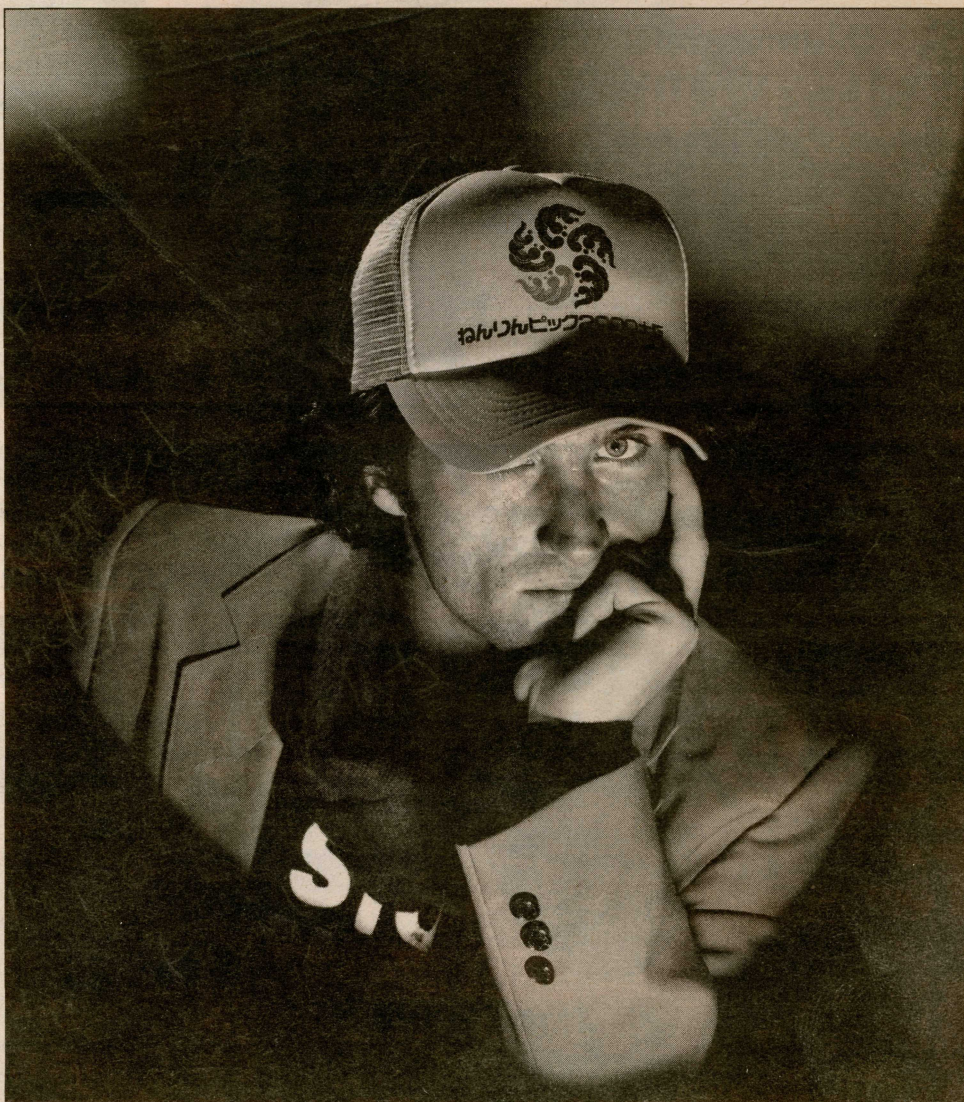
"It's characterized by a kind of bonhomie, you could say, a willingness to be inclusive," he explains. "Performances that you might first think of as being poetry or music would include multimedia much more readily, be much more intermedia, be much more open to variety."

Radix Theatre's LIVE contribution is typically interdisciplinary. Part drive-in theatre, part live radio drama, part installation, *Half-a-Tank* is about our shared relationship to the automobile. "It's dysfunctional," says artistic director Andrew Laurenson, "and we can't get out of it. We love them, and they're killing us."

As usual, Radix is kicking theatre out of the theatre: the venue for the November 22 performance is a large parking lot at the foot of Ontario Street. Audience members are asked to arrive in their cars. ("If you don't drive, carpool.") The vehicles will then be arranged in a circle, facing inwards, with the performance in the centre. The star of the show is a circling 1971 Dodge Monaco, with a driver who will be joined by other human performers. Music and sound will be broadcast to the audience via their car radios, tuned to an FM microtransmitter.

Radix has a reputation for producing site-specific works that are interactive and socially relevant. However, Laurenson feels he is sometimes working against the presumption that performance art lacks technique. Rather than alienate an audience by producing inaccessible works, he wants to include the viewer in the performer's role. In *Half-a-Tank*, not only do audience members create the performance space with their cars, potential viewers are also asked to help write the play. A voice-mail box has been dedicated to receiving phone-in car stories and suggestions, which will then be incorporated into the script. (To fill out the audio questionnaire or tell your car story, call 604-254-0707, ext. 2.)

A different sort of technology will be



Don't ask LIVE artistic director David Yonge to define the performance-art themes in his upcoming series. He's waiting until he's experienced them. Alex Waterhouse-Hayward photo.

deployed on November 20, when Australian artist Lea Donnan streams a live Web cast via the LIVE Web site (www.livevancouver.bc.ca/). It's part of *Chiasma*, a project initiated by the Folly Gallery in Lancaster, England, whereby three artists perform over three days in their hometowns; their pieces are broadcast to international projection sites in Lancaster, Sydney, Venice, Hong Kong, and Vancouver. Donnan maintains that the expression of faith is a universal theme and is intent on showing ritual in day-to-day living. She views worship not only as a sacred act of divinity but as a modern rite of personal sanctity: "Every day is a performance of sorts, a navigation exercise."

Donnan often uses animals in her work as a way of addressing the human condition. In this piece, she is "an adorned secretary/wife/assistant and high-society temptress addressing a computer with communications borrowed from primates". Add to this flying Danishes, shaking fists,

chimps sticking twigs in computerized termite mounds, and you'll have some idea of what to expect when her portion of *Chiasma* is broadcast. (The other *Chiasma* participants, local artist Rebecca Belmore and England's Hester Reeve, offer their contributions on November 21 and 22, respectively.)

The LIVE site is also an essential source of information on the many performances not discussed here. But it won't tell you whether they're good or not. For that, you'll have to dip your feet into the once-scary waters of performance art itself.

"It's not all going to be great," Yonge says, laughing. "But maybe I shouldn't say that. After all, we're trying to change the public's perception of performance art. Give it a chance, and you'll probably see it as an incredibly powerful medium." ■

The LIVE Biennial of Performance Art happens at various venues until November 29. For information, visit www.livevancouver.bc.ca/.

TIBET FUNDRAISER BANKING ON INSTANT DHARMA

When Luyen Dao recently heard from his parents that a pair of family friends who happen to be high-ranking Tibetan monks were visiting town, he didn't leave it to Banyen Books to form the welcoming committee. On an impulse, the CBC Web developer organized a celebration for Nenten Rinpoche and Khen Rinpoche, abbot and abbot emeritus, respectively, of Tibet's Chungba Monastery and India's Sera Mey Monastery. On Saturday night (October 25) at the Roundhouse, the public is invited to brush robes with these close associates of the Dalai Lama, both of whom live in exile at Sera Mey in Mysore, India.

Dao told the *Straight* that The Fabric of Tibet will reveal "an aspect of Tibetan culture that is not necessarily tied in to spirituality but nonetheless is a huge part of it". In addition to

a *puja*, or traditional blessing, there'll be a travel slide show, educational exhibits, and performances by Tibetan, Vietnamese, and Indian musicians.

All money raised goes to the Chungba Monastery reconstruction fund, Tibet's 4,000-plus exiled monks,

ARTS NOTES

and the Chinese-occupied country's impoverished children. How tough was it booking the two über-monks? "It's just a matter of getting into their schedules and asking them," Dao said. MLAs, be mindful.

Advance tickets—call 604-215-0011—are \$12 for adults and \$10 for seniors and students; at the door,

they're \$15 and \$12. Info: www.dharmaofthewest.com/.

OLDER ROMANTICS REUNITE

The Group of Five is having a public reunion. The Basement Show, opening tonight (October 23) at the Electra building (Nelson and Hornby streets), features multiroom installations by sculptor-turned-author Douglas Coupland and painters Graham Gillmore, Angela Grossmann, Attila Richard Lukacs, and Derek Root. This subterranean convergence of the erstwhile Young Romantics—who became friends in the early 1980s at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design—runs only until next Friday (October 31).

"They haven't had a show [together] in 20 years," said Naomi Sawada, public programs and publicity coordinator of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, which helped organize the exhibit. "It's very impromptu; it's sort of a reaffirmation of their friendship and a look back on that time." For info, call 604-822-2759.

VAG GETS UNSTUFFED The Vancouver Art Gallery has never been big on contemporary design, a deficiency it's trying to correct by having Bruce Mau curate the international touring exhibit *Massive Change: The Future of Global Design Culture*, opening at the VAG next summer. In the meantime, there's *Extraordinary*, an unstuffy-sounding fundraising gala at Canada Place on Friday (October 24).

"It doesn't matter what your lifestyle is—whether you live in a house or an apartment—you're always looking for design items," cochair Monte Clark said over the phone. To supply that demand, there's a live auction of ultra-desirable pieces (highlights at www.vanartgallery.bc.ca/) by the likes of Arthur Erickson, David Hockney, Ralph Lauren, and Martha Sturdy. In a departure from the usual sit-down format, guests can graze on food by 18 top local restaurants, take in DJs, and frequent the Bombay Sapphire Blue Lounge. For tickets, \$150, call 604-662-4747.

GG NOMINATIONS FOR B.C.

Several B.C. authors and publishers are among this year's Governor General's Literary Awards nominees. Tom Wayman got a poetry nod for *My Father's Cup* (Harbour Publishing); in drama, Maggie Clements was nominated for *Burning Vision* (Talonbooks); Maggie de Vries's *Missing Sarah: A Vancouver Woman Remembers Her Vanished Sister* (Penguin Books Canada) is a nonfiction contender; and Sarah Ellis is a children's-literature finalist for her novel *The Several Lives of Orphan Jack* (Douglas & McIntyre, whose books received six of the 70 nominations). Other local houses on the list are Nightwood Editions and Raincoast Books.

The four children's-lit winners will be announced on November 10, while the main awards presentation is November 12. For a list of nominees, see www.canadacouncil.ca/.

• NICK ROCKEL