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outrageous

Demented diva Astrid Hadad brings her controversial cabaret to Vancouver

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BY JANET SMITH

Astrid Hadad has appeared on-stage with a giant, blinking sacred heart strapped onto her head. She's had stagehands use pulleys to manipulate her long, black hair into a crucifix shape. She's masqueraded as a veiled Mary Magdalene wearing a massive skirt fashioned out of rubber breasts, and she's crooned campy cabaret numbers while sporting an aura-radiating Virgin of Guadalupe costume. As much as all this might horrify Pope Benedict XVI, Hadad is still pretty sure she won't go straight to hell. The Mexico City-based performance artist, who hails from a deeply conservative Catholic family of 11 in the Yucatan region, knows she has at least one person trying to make up for her blasphemous ways.

"Even now my mother is a *cucaracha de iglesia*," the affable Hadad says on the phone from Mexico City, breaking into a husky, tequila-cured laugh. In Spanish, she has just called the Hadad matriarch a "cockroach of the church", but what she's trying to say is that her mom is a bona fide holy roller. "I go by in my life very confident because I know my mother prays for me every day."

At least the church can take some consolation in the fact that it's not the sole target of Hadad's freaked-out one-woman musical revue, which blazes into the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts next Saturday (October 22). Donning costumes that are Dada meets Dali, the cabaret artist takes on everything from domestic violence and female stereotypes to American imperialism and political corruption. At the same time, she's a walking pastiche of Mexico's outrageously colourful culture, integrating cacti, sombreros, Christmas lights, Mayan symbols, traditional fringed shawls, and saint icons into her "wearable sets". It ends up looking like a mammoth piñata



Dada meets Dali in Astrid Hadad's wearable sets, which mix religious iconography and Mexican kitsch.

Outrageous

Mexican cabaret artist Astrid Hadad knows no bounds

full of Frida Kahlo imagery has exploded all over the stage. Hadad, who designs all her outfits, says she pores over everything from historical books and classic artworks to Mexico City's lively sidewalks for objects to wear: "When you walk by downtown, you can take a lot of ideas...I love to just walk a lot along the streets, and I think we have a very rich culture."

Her love of that culture extends to music: backed by her band, Los Tarzanes, she also works old *ranchera* tunes, boleros, rumbas, and mariachi numbers into her act.

Hadad is appearing here as part of the LIVE Biennial of Performance Art (which opens Saturday [October 15] and runs to November 26), and like many of the 50 or so acts appearing at the festival, she defies categorization.

"She both lampoons and loves traditional Mexican culture," explains Gary Cristall, the Vancouver Folk Music Festival founder and one-time Canada Council music head who's a huge fan of the artist. He's speaking from an apartment in Lucca, Italy, where he's on a three-month sojourn and where Hadad's music has made it into the 25 CDs he carried in his suitcase. "But it would be a mistake to think she's just a comedienne or a social comic; she is able to move from being very, very funny and acerbic as an artist addressing Mexican society into being a great singer. She's a genuinely original interpreter of Mexican music, and her band is just phenomenal, so her act can be enjoyed on that level too."

Music, in fact, is where Hadad got her start in show business. Where she grew up, in the small town of Chetumal near the border of Belize, there wasn't much else to do. "There was no television; it was like a ranch. There was no running water. My brothers and my mother and everybody sang and we made theatre all the time," she says in her

unique brand of Spanglish. "But it was the happiest part of my life, because now, even though I am happy, I have to work and worry about everything." She showed obvious talent, but becoming a singer never looked like an option for Hadad: "For my parents it was not possible, because my destiny was to get married," she says.

Hadad rebelled and eventually escaped the countryside to Mexico City to study communications and political science. While there, she started singing with her guitar in pubs. "I thought life was like in the movies, and some producers would find me in those places and I would be famous. But it was not that way," she says, and then there are more peals of throaty laughter.

Soon, Hadad was transferring to the prestigious Centro Universitario de Teatro, where she had to pass a series of rigorous auditions. "I found that just to stand up and sing was not enough for me, so I went to theatre school. I wanted to train my body and my voice to be an emissary for all kinds of things."

Her stint there led to immediate work: she toured Europe in a well-received theatrical version of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Later, she became known as an actor in another kind of opera: a popular Mexican soap. But at the same time, she was developing a very different act in the thriving underground cabaret scene of Mexico City. Here, her women characters were born. More exaggerated versions of those satirical females still exist in her act today: her *Rancherita* ("ranch girl"), her bolero-crooning *femme fatale*, and others. Between tunes, she'd talk politics; she was trying, she says, to recreate the subversive cabaret energy of Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill's Berlin scene.

Hadad had also discovered the songs of Lucha Reyes, a rowdy Mexican singer who created a scandal in the '30s and '40s. Reyes was the first woman to take on such *ranchero* numbers as the drunken ode to drowning your sorrows in the national drink, "La Tequilera". "At that time,

see next page

VANCOUVER GOES LIVE FOR PERFORMANCE-ART FEST >>>



◆ The funny thing about organizing a performance-art festival is you're never quite sure what you're going to get. That's the position Glenn Alteen finds himself in as he prepares for the latest installment of the LIVE Biennial of Performance Art (which runs Saturday [October 15] to November 26)—or prepares as much as can be expected. "I was in theatre years ago, and if all goes well there, you know exactly what's going to happen, whereas with performance art you only have a vague parameter," the chair of the event says over the phone from the grunt gallery, where he is director.

Adding to the element of surprise is the fact that performance

art can take so many forms. In this, the biggest biennial yet, there are 50 acts—almost double the number of the event's first year in 1999—and they span everything from music to processions to reading rooms. They range from big touring productions like Mexican cabaret singer Astrid Hadad and American musician and interdisciplinary artist Meredith Monk to smaller, site-specific and interactive projects. The latter includes Irene Loughlin's November 16 presentation of *Nadia*, where she and the Renfrew Gymnastics Club, in the Waterfront Station lobby, explore the darker side of Romanian gymnast Nadia Comaneci's life. Then there's the Hal Winkler Project's

The Nova Library at the Vancouver Public Library's downtown branch: a public reading room of books, chosen by addicts from the Downtown Eastside, that opens October 17. In contrast to that relatively small setting, visitors are taking over the cemetery grounds at East 41st Avenue and Fraser Street for Paula Jardine's *A Night for All Souls* on October 29. (See story on page 41.) And all month, LIVE celebrates Vancouver jazz, performance, writing, and visual-art innovator Al Neil as a father of the form; he takes the stage at the Western Front (October 15) and the Roundhouse Community Arts & Recreation Centre (November 10).

Believe it or not, there is a link-

ing theme to all the work. The last fest was called Performance Art and the Academy, and it centred around pieces that helped legitimize the form. This year, LIVE dubs itself *Altered States* and takes a swing in the opposite direction: the curatorial statement declared that the fourth installment would centre on "performance art incorporating the irrational, the subversive, the spiritual, the intuitive, the confrontational and the traumatic. It focuses on the artist as prophet, as shaman, as masochist, as addict, as anarchist."

In other words, the lineup promises to shake things up around town. Still, Alteen expects the fest's turnout to continue to grow: "Vancouver

is such a performance-art town. It has a role in the cultural life of the city that you just don't see anywhere else, and there's always been a lot of it," he says. "A lot of other art forms are envious of performance art because of its freedom."

LIVE has played a big role in bringing performance art, if not exactly into the mainstream, then out from the under-underground. "What's exciting is that, for a lot of traditional venues, they wouldn't look at performance art as a form that would be viable to present," Alteen says. "But when LIVE comes in, it becomes more of an event."

View the entire schedule at www.livevancouver.bc.ca/.

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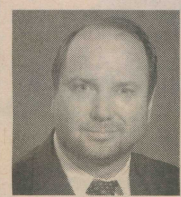
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Nora and Ted Sterling established the prize at SFU in 1993 to honor "work which challenges complacency and provokes controversy or contributes to its understanding."

Outrageous

from previous page

women could only sing bucolic songs and sing about town and family in a soft voice, like a beautiful flower. But she dared to sing these kinds of songs, and the middle class would turn off their radios. So I love the life of this woman, and I began to sing the songs that she sang."

Hadad's first fully realized show was a kind of warped one-woman musical about Reyes's life. Her *tequilera* chick lives on on-stage, wearing a cheesy tourist-issue sombrero, a huge peasant skirt covered in icons of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and a conical bustier. Making it clear she can hold her own in the local cantina, she guzzles Jose Cuervo straight from the bottle. In the French documentary *Astrid Hadad, La Tequilera*, she takes the act one step further while performing at a cabaret: drowning her sorrows becomes the only way she can survive the indignities of a downtrodden ranchero wife. "As a good Mexican woman, I'll suffer agony," she sings to a mariachi-style beat, and then starts flailing herself with rope.

It's just one in a parade of provocative female archetypes. In *Astrid Hadad, La Tequilera*, they range from a Carmen Miranda type—who rumbas with two ridiculous paper pineapples sprouting breastlike from her head—to her most controversial persona. The woman wears a giant peacock tail of spiky cactus leaves and a skirt covered in Day of the Dead skeletons. She limps in on crutches, one eye obscured by a head bandage, because she has been beaten by her macho husband. "You beat me up so much yesterday evening and still I haven't left you yet," she croons in a kitschy lounge number. And then she holds her hand out to ask her hubby for more money.

"The economy has to grow together with women's liberation," Hadad says, turning quite serious. "It's very hard for women here; it's easier [financially] for women to stay with the man. That's very sad but it's true."

Cristall remembers seeing another scathing evocation when he caught Hadad's show on one of his frequent trips to Mexico City. She staggered submissively under the weight of gigantic lilies strapped to her back, satirizing the famous Diego Rivera painting of a virginal flower vendor. "She was essentially saying Diego Rivera was a jerk," Cristall says. "To say he was a lady's man is an understatement."

On the *Astrid Hadad* DVD, she also appears wearing a big sombrero with a moving rubber hand on top that she tells the crowd is



Astrid Hadad is as likely to lampoon such icons of Mexican culture as Diego Rivera's flower vendor as she is modern-day male-female relations.

for "self-pleasure."

"I was reading not long ago that in Mexico, most of the women don't have sexual satisfaction, 70 percent of them," Hadad says. "And in rural areas, the number was more like 80 percent. There are many women that, when they go to my show, when it is finished they say: 'You make me reflect on things.'"

Although Mexican women have made great strides after centuries of oppression, her blunt representations of domestic abuse, sexual satisfaction, and submissive wives is still nothing less than shocking in a Latin American context—and even a North American one.

"To a small degree, women have been breaking down the patrilineal society in Mexico, but in many ways it's still brutally misogynistic," Cristall observes, pointing to the ongoing serial murders of young female factory workers in the border town of Juárez. "The levels of violence against women is terrifying, as it is in many countries. But Hadad, along with other women artists like Lila Downs or Liliana Felipe, has been able to challenge that. In that sense, she's an important artist with links to those social movements. When she takes on a stage persona of a macho Mexican man, there are howls of laughter there because many Mexican women have been waiting all their lives to do something like this."

Still, Hadad says her main goal is to entertain and never to blame; she jokes that one of her own faults is being too nurturing with the men in her life. "I say some things that are shocking sometimes, but what I do in the show is not to speak out against men

but speak about relationships between men and women with humour," she clarifies. "The young women that are students now have different attitudes with men, but even these women who are cultured, many of them have all this damn education but in their houses they believe if you are a mother you still have to give everything to your sons." And more laughter crackles over the phone again.

That's Hadad, after all: a woman who can find humour in almost everything around her. That ability has secured her place at the front of an irreverent Mexican renaissance that includes filmmakers like *Amores Perros* director Alejandro González Iñárritu and visual artists like Damian Ortega.

"I'm amazed that somebody has the courage to bring her to Vancouver, and one of my few regrets about being in Lucca is that I'll miss the show. If I could think of 10 or 15 great performers that, if I had the means, I'd charter a Learjet to go to see them in concert, she'd be one," Cristall raves. "She represents a level of Mexican culture that most people in Vancouver are not going to be able to see. Mexican culture and music is still, unfortunately, a victim of stereotypes, so the chance to see a contemporary artist who is so sharp and smart about deconstructing and interpreting and lampooning those stereotypes is really a rare opportunity."

Who knows if all that work will earn her a place in heaven, but wherever Mexico's demented diva is headed in her big skirts and crazy hats, you can be sure she'll be laughing all the way. ♦

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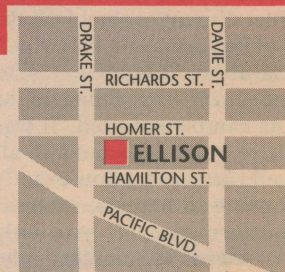
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