

DYKE



PSYCHE

BY ESTHER ROTHBLUM

Janice Perry: Lesbian Performer of "Highly Exaggerated Autobiography"

I recently saw Janice Perry perform during National Coming Out Week at the University of Vermont. By the time I asked her to describe her life and her work, she was off performing in Switzerland, so we communicated by email. Here are her responses to my questions:

Tell me the story of how you became a lesbian comedian.

Is this a trick question? Because of course, there is the story of how I became a lesbian, and then the story of how I began performing. I never intended to become a "lesbian comedian." I began performing and because my sexuality is part of my life, it comes out in the show, undisguised. Audiences don't often see lesbianism presented in this way; it's either "WOW, LOOK AT ME, I'M A BIG DYKE!!" or very covert. My mission is to present challenging work in a way that is accessible.

Most, but not all, of my work is highly exaggerated autobiography. I am always trying to find common denominators, trying to weave many different aspects into each piece.

The major theme of a piece about an IRS audit was power and abuse of power (this was pre-IRS reform). The fact that the auditor was coming on to me was the vehicle to exaggerate the taxpayer's fear and the auditor's power. I wanted to unequivocally show the equation between sex and power and fear. That the auditor is a woman adds another layer. This piece also unequivocally describes both the dedication required and the extremely dire financial situation of artists in general. So there are many levels that are available to the audience. They can take whatever they want from the performance. While this is a theatrical exaggeration of the truth, it is a true story. I WAS audited by a woman, who DID abuse her power.

What messages are you bringing to lesbians?

I want lesbians and gays to see that it really is okay to be out. That we can present ourselves in public and not be killed for it. I'm not hiding anything, I'm not preaching anything, I'm just going about my business of performing in a perfectly natural way (or imperfectly natural). When I play in some small town and the audience is mixed, as it often is, I think that it is empow-



Janice Perry will perform at the Wright Theater on the campus of Middlebury College at 8 pm on January 9. See calendar listing.

ering for all of us. Internalized homophobia is the real killer.

I am also showing my total commitment to my work. My

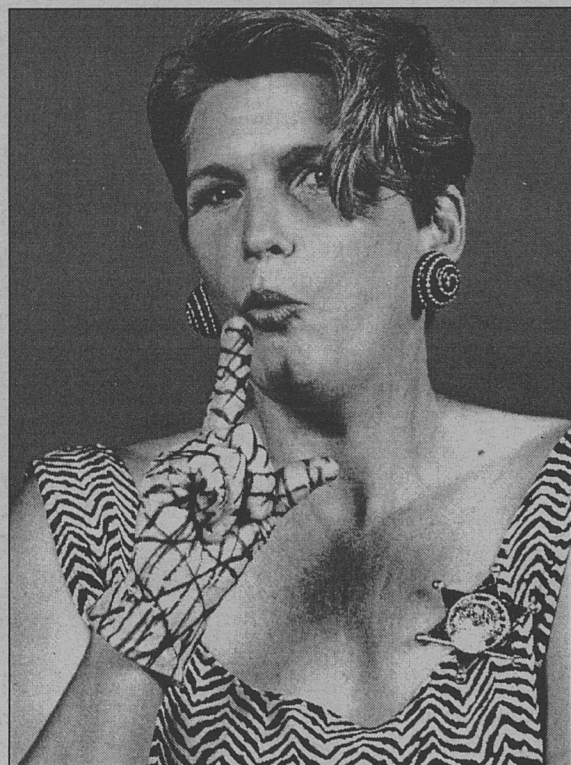
This is why I am able to work so often in Europe. In 1982, when I first started, there was either theater or stand-up in the USA, and nothing in between.

I had no language to describe my work. I called it "Comedy—

content from a lesbian-feminist perspective in a highly comedic way. The comedic aspect makes my work much more accessible to many more people.

Does a particular performance stand out as memorable?

Last year (1997) the Swiss queers organized a demonstra-



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R o c k —
M u s i c —
T h e a t e r —
Satire." When I first started working in Europe, I found out that there is a word for it —

tion in Bern against the new constitution and the refusal of the government to include equal rights for homosexuals with basic human rights. The organizers of the demo invited me to come and perform. There were Swiss, French, German, and Italian speakers and me.

I came out on stage wearing a Statue of Liberty crown and carrying a big penis and said, "I want to thank the Swiss Government for making me feel right at home here. It's so reassuring to know that I will be discriminated against wherever I go." Then I did a piece from the early '80s about the constitution which says that the pre-

performance is more theatrical than stand-up comedy. This is "kabarett" with a small "k" in the European tradition of powerful political statements launched from the platform of comedy, rather than "Kabarett" with a big "K" or "Cabaret" with a "c" which is usually women in glittery evening gowns singing "Send in the Clowns."

"kabarett."

I use my whole body to deliver the monologues, as well as costumes, singing, lighting, and very strong facial gestures. I am performing pieces with what I see to be the big themes — Greed, Fear, Abuse of Power, Sex, War, Death, and Taxes. I'm not so interested in just telling jokes. I am presenting strong

amble really should read like this:

"We, the MEN of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union... No, that should be, 'We, the WHITE MEN of the United States ...' No, that should be 'We the CONSERVATIVE WHITE MEN...' No, that should be 'We the RICH, CONSERVATIVE, WHITE, MEN...' No, that should be 'We the OLD, RICH, CONSERVATIVE, WHITE, MEN...'" They really got it.

Is Janice Perry the performer different from Janice Perry the individual? Do you find yourself performing to friends and lovers?

I am really lucky in that I get to let out a lot of my desire for attention in my work. Before I started performing on stage, I was performing all day long, because I had no outlet for this creativity. It must have been hell to be around. I thank my friends for putting up with me. Now I am much more relaxed in my personal life.

Sometimes when I arrive at a theater where they don't know my work, they look a bit worried, like — "Uh-oh, this is just a normal 48-year-old woman and she isn't even wearing make-up and what kind of show will this be?"

When I go on stage, they are amazed by my energy, which is very intense. They can't believe it's the same person. There is a definite difference between my work and my private life.

I lead a quiet life and I have many and varied interests. I love nature, hiking, gardening, cross-country skiing, bird-watching. I'm an avid reader, I love the classics, English social comedies from the '20s and '30s, fiction, history. I love music — rock and roll, classical, heavy metal, opera. I love to go to the theater. Dance. Visual Arts. Architecture. Archeology. Yoga. Fashion. I'm very interested in both pre-history and pop culture. I like to see what is going on in "society," both regionally and globally, to try to identify the trends, see what is universal and then use this information in my work. In some way I'm always working, always noticing, observing. But I can do it from the sidelines. I don't need to be the center. I get enough of that onstage. ▼

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