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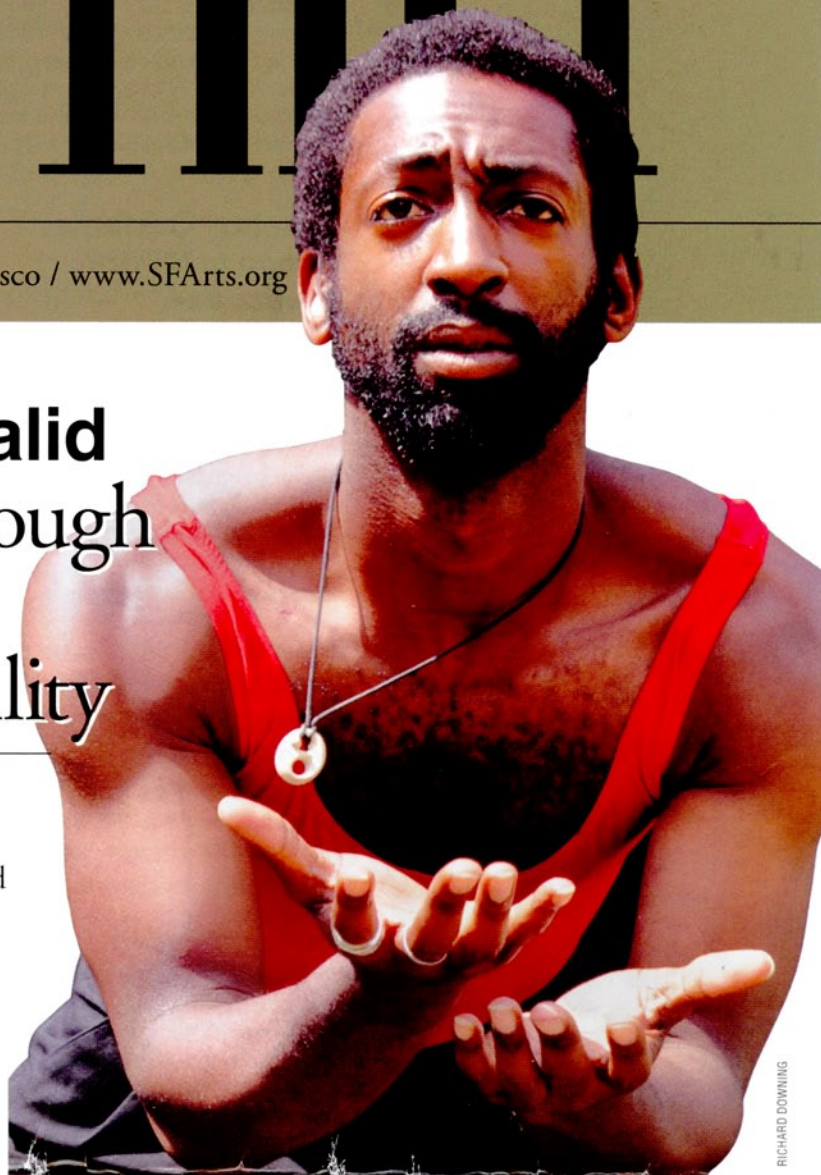
Sins Invalid Life Through the Lens of Disability

by Jean Schiffman

“Disability is shrouded in mystery,” declares Patty Berne, director of *Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility*. “And it’s absurd, because disability is a common experience.” Most of us, at some point in our lives, she asserts, will have limited functionality.

The San Francisco performance project for artists with disabilities was established in 2006 by Berne, who is of Haitian and Japanese background and uses a wheelchair, and Leroy F. Moore, Jr., an African-American poet/performer with a physical disability. *Sins* runs a variety of programs year-round, its most public offering being an annual production that brings the individual artists’ personal, and often extremely intimate, stories to the stage.

In this month’s fifth annual show, *Knitting Stories Over Time and Geography*, more than a dozen performers explore



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Antoine-Devinci Hunter, who is deaf, performs a “dance of resistance” as part of *Knitting Stories*, a performance work that explores issues relating to disability.

various issues through the lens of disability, using dance, movement, film and video projections, ensemble and solo theatrical pieces, spoken word and music. “Part of what we’re doing is examining this [false] dichotomy between what is disabled and what is able-bodied,” explains director Berne, who also provides voiceover narration. *Knitting Stories* is almost guaranteed to break taboos and challenge commonly held assumptions, especially about disability and sexuality.

The idea of knitting together personal stories—forging links among a segment of the population that **CONTINUED ON PAGE 3**

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tends to be physically separate—grew from ongoing discussions among the performers. “People with disabilities are isolated from one another and from the broader community,” says Berne, a longtime activist and advocate for disability rights and other social justice issues. The idea of physical isolation led to a need to emphasize psychic connections. The point, adds Berne, “is to invoke a sharing—a liberating experience for all of us, not just the performers.”

Thus the show opens with nationally known writer/performer Aurora Levins Morales’ invocation, an open invitation to all to call forth personal stories about “disability in the context of race, sex and gender identity.”

MC Seeley Quest provides conceptual links from story to story and embodies a thematic character, true-life historical figure Carrie Buck, a poor, working-class woman believed by some to be feeble-minded, who was forcibly sterilized in the early 1920s in the South as part of a government eugenics program. Quest as Buck moves in and out of that role, and into the present, throughout the production.

“The pieces speak to one another,” says Berne, who dramaturgically found ways to combine the various stories into a unified whole. For example, local writer/performer Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha and Seattle-based Ellery Russian share the stage for “Crip Sex Moments,” in which each enacts three personal vignettes about sexual experiences.

This particular piece evolved in response to an audience member’s comment from last year, says Lakshmi, a writer/performer/teacher of Sri Lankan heritage. Sins Invalid’s performers are all about reclaiming and re-

joining in the inherent beauty and sensuality of their bodies, and the viewer said that while he appreciated the rare value of these types of stories, he also wanted to see the unvarnished picture—“the good, the bad, the ugly and the ridiculous,” as Lakshmi says.

So Lakshmi, who has chronic fibromyalgia that causes immune, balance and mobility challenges, and Russian, who was run over by a train at 18 and walks with prostheses, will reveal some of their own weird and funny experiences with physical intimacy.

Moore’s contribution is a two-person piece, created with input from local choreographer Sean Dorsey, and performed with Juba Kalamka, that explores aspects of black masculinity. “Juba is queer, and his mother had a disability,” says Moore, who is a poet and activist in the areas of race and disability. “I grew up black and disabled. So our piece is movement-based, about our experience growing up. We’ll be wiggling and crawling onstage... then we get up and throw out words to describe each other and the words grow hateful.” Ultimately the two realize they’re brothers under the skin. Dominoes are an ongoing motif throughout the piece, a culturally prevalent game in the black community, says Moore.

Other performances include a “dance of resistance” by Antoine-Devinci Hunter, who’s deaf; a piece about obsessive compulsive disorder by actors Amal Kouttab, Pamela Greenberg, Tina D’Ella and Adrienne Krug; a film by Berne and Todd Herman about “reclaiming desire in the face of violence”; a striptease in a wheelchair by Houston-based spoken word artist Maria R. Palacios; and Alex Cafarelli’s martial arts piece that connects breath work to asthma.

Singer Nomy Lamm—who in a previous performance detached a prosthetic leg and beat out a rhythm on it to accompany her haunting original songs—contributes two

music-based pieces, one on “Judaic magic, chants and rituals.”

It should be noted that Sins’ definition of “disabled” is broad enough to encompass those marginalized by society for myriad reasons: “people with physical impairments, people who belong to a sensory minority, people with emotional disabilities, cognitive challenges, chronic severe illness.” That includes disabilities not immediately apparent. This year’s performers represent the whole spectrum, from chronic pain to gender differences and everything in between that society classifies as “other.”

“We’re diving into deep questions, like eugenics and population control, and who gets to live in their bodies,” says Lakshmi. The first time she saw a Sins Invalid show, she cried; she’d never seen a show that dealt, in such an integrated form, with the way disabled people live and love. As a performer, she’d been looking for something like this for a long time.

“Some people cry by the end of the show,” concurs Berne. She always asks audience members afterward if their views on disability and sexuality have changed, and 80 to 90 percent say yes. “For those who don’t identify as having a disability—for them to witness disability and not pathologize it, to see people celebrating non-normative bodies”—it’s revelatory, she explains. “Because they have bodies, too. This is about... embodiment and sexuality.”

“Yes, we have challenges, and life itself possesses challenges,” she adds. “Reality has its moments of grace and of difficulty. The show depicts both. We’re not Pollyanna. We’re not saying it’s all gravy and easy. We say the truth.”

Editor’s Note: We learned at press time that *Knotting Stories*, scheduled for Oct. 8-10 at Theater Artaud, has been postponed until early 2011. Please visit sinsinvalid.org for updates on performance time and location.