

Miller excites and enlightens

By Alaina Baum

For the Oregon Daily Emerald

In a rich glow of red light Tim Miller, performance artist and gay activist, began to remove his clothes.

Off went the black T-shirt, suspenders, jeans torn at both knees, red socks and high-tops until Miller stood stark naked in front of 281 people at the University's Robinson Theater Monday night.

REVIEW

In his widely acclaimed and criticized autobiographical performance, *My Queer Body*, Miller's bared body becomes a pillar of strength. Miller courageously confronted the indifferent politicians, obnoxious homophobics, the devastation of AIDS and the many others who would prefer he shut up, cover up and never say what he came here to say.

"I am listening to places on my body and speaking their tales. The places of hurt and the places of pleasure," Miller said. "I do this as a way of knowing who I am and to reclaim my flesh and blood from those who would try to control it."

During the roughly 20-minute nude sequence in his act, the proclaimed "activist slutty queer point of light" delves into an imaginary volcano displaying not only his flesh but the fears, anger, confusion and dreams of his gay soul.

After this vulnerable exposure and confession, Miller climbs off the stage, walks bravely into the aisle, and sits - nude - on the lap of a random member of the audience.

At once, Miller achieves a rare intimacy with his viewers in a way that may seem shocking and embarrassing to some, but empowering and enlightening to others.

Using nudity not to create a meaningless spectacle but to convey an important message, Miller unashamedly and humanly navigates his audience around his body, a living map of gay experiences, hoping to lead people to a deeper understanding and acceptance of homosexuality.

Miller begins his avant-garde, 80-minute monologue with a creative vision of his own conception, "one queer little spermlet trying to fight the odds" to the ovum against the Jesse Helmses of the sperm population.

Yet the birth canal is only the first of many places Miller faced discrimination.

In 1990, Miller was unanimously recommended for a Solo Performer Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts only to be rejected by the then-NEA chief John Frohnmayer



COURTESY PHOTO

Performance artist Tim Miller delighted his audience at the University's Robinson Theater on Monday night. Miller was one of the infamous NEA Four when his grant from the organization was rescinded because of the homosexual content of his performances. Miller and his co-plaintiffs eventually won a lawsuit in the case.

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Miller became one of the famous "NEA Four"—four national performance artists denied grants—who launched a highly-publicized lawsuit against the government agency. They eventually won a settlement after a Los Angeles federal district judge ruled that the NEA's grant decision-making process violated the First Amendment.

Miller's personal triumph over this censorship controversy becomes translated into a victory for anyone who desires the freedom to speak their mind about themselves and their bodies. By candidly using his body and voice during his performances, Miller hopes to activate and inspire his viewers.

"A converted, energized progressive audience does not exist," Miller told the *Boston Globe* in 1992. "Every person I know is beaten down, stomped down, feeling despair, frustration, pain."

Whether the "battle of the body" entails slavery, enslavement of women's bodies, oppression of the "queer body" or laws forbidding "certain kinds of sex in 23 states," Miller said this "ultimately oppresses every single person."

Believing that there's an incredible panic and shame in the way people are taught to feel about their bodies, Miller's raw performance achieves a rare openness that brings beauty, acceptance, power and even comedy into the discourse about the body.

From his first kiss with a man on the sands of Laguna Beach—"the Big Bang... the triumph over every time when I was chosen last for football"—to his first sexual encounter on the same bed in which he was conceived; from his

hopelessness as he watches his friends suffer and die from AIDS to his angry protests against ex-California Gov. Pete Wilson's veto of the gay rights bill, Miller brings his tales to his audience with startling directness.

Even though much of his performance focuses on gay experiences, Miller transcends sexuality to communicate in a language that is as true and relevant to anyone who ever felt criticized for being different.

Many deem Miller's work overly explicit and unsettling. However, the Robinson Theater's audience was clearly moved by Miller's provoking performance, giving him a near standing ovation at its close.

Although the political debate over "proper family values" is still attempting to reaffirm the necessity of keeping artists like Miller on the fringes of the visible society, this has not thwarted his efforts to perform *My Queer Body* and other works all over North America and Europe.

Julia Manela, the performance arts coordinator for the EMU Cultural Forum, was mainly responsible for successfully convincing Tim Miller to bring his work to the University stage.

"I'm interested in bringing diverse voices to Eugene, the voices the OCA would like to silence," Manela said.

"Tim Miller gives expression," said theater arts department chairman Grant McKernie, "to those of us who are angry, disappointed, and hopeful, those of us who have heard the cries of discrimination, who would put us down particularly in this state and who would silence us."

But here in Eugene, Miller's voice is neither censored nor silent. And people are listening.

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