

Doing the NEA spin?

This is the dawn of the flexing of power in ourselves

B Y L E E L Y N C H

I have just spent the weekend struggling with the National Endowment for the Arts. Again. This doesn't have to do with Robert Mapplethorpe. Or with recent legislation forcing the NEA to discriminate against homo-erotic art. I didn't need any of that to provoke struggle. I was wrestling with the NEA on my own long before the politicians interfered.

I'm a gay storyteller. It's natural for me, in my blood, what have you. It's all I've ever wanted to be, career-wise, though the majority of my income is from social work.

T H E A M A Z O N T R A I L

Every year as the deadline approaches I go into my NEA spin. Sure, I'd like more time to spend on writing and a \$20,000 Individual Fellowship would make that possible. I also wouldn't mind the recognition that would help to fuel my creative energies. And it is not unknown for lesbians to be awarded grants: Becky Birtha, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Chrystos.

I agonize over which of my stories, what parts of my novels are: better written, less offensive to straights, most universal. That is, how can I demonstrate that I write well when I know from experience that most straight people or even gay people who primarily function in the straight world will trip over my blatantly queer characters?

The answer, of course, is that I can't. My stories are my characters and I write about us.

When the Feminist Writer came to dinner last night I needed to talk about my frustration. Between the carrot and onion soup and the Pictionary Game we tried to identify the magic key which would open the grant treasure chest.

The Feminist Writer has never applied for the NEA because she feels she doesn't have enough credentials. "Minnie Bruce Pratt has books," she pointed out.

"I have seven!" I protested.

The Feminist Writer works in the clerical field to earn her keep. Her real work, the stuff that moves and inspires many women, has little financial value so far.

I know, if love and loyalty were dollars, my grant funding would never run out. My readers are the kind who tell me that my books have taught them, sustained them. They sustain me more than NEA recognition ever could.

Why do I try then?

This weekend my play "Trying to Get Into Life" opened in its first full production in Tucson, Arizona. West Broadway, lets call it. I couldn't be there (money? yep. job conflicts? yep.), but the thrill of knowing that these actors memorized the words and characters I so believed in, is a thrill which leapt the miles without a problem.

Yet, here I go again, subtly putting my accomplishment down because it's not on Broadway. How many lesbian plays in which the dykes have happy endings ever get a Broadway production?

"I'm self-publishing my plays," said the

Feminist Writer.

"Did you try —?" I asked about a lesbian publishing house which has done plays.

"Yes," she said in a disgusted tone. "No one's interested. I'm going to do it myself because there are lots of little women's theaters out there looking for plays like these. This is the only way to get the work to them."

So we become, not just clerical or social workers, but self-publishers, distributors. Result: an invisible and very real undermining of gay art. We don't have time to write!

Ingrid Sischy, in *The New Yorker* (11/13/89), compares the Mapplethorpe exhibit with another show now traveling the country. Minor White, whose career in photography began in about 1945, was also gay. He was, unlike Mapplethorpe, extremely closeted. His homo-erotic imagery, reports Sischy, is represented by rocks and other nature imagery. She concludes that his art suffered from this veiled depiction of his own experience. She also notes that his work is displayed with problems.

Perhaps the Feminist Writer should channel her anger. Instead of writing her truth about the oppression of women, and lesbians, she could pull a Carson McCullers and let an enraged adolescent girl rebel on stage for a couple of hours, until she reaches puberty and is suddenly transformed into a happy heterosexual.

Perhaps I, like Willa Cather, could transform heroines into heroes. Or the heroine of *Dusty's Queen of Hearts Diner* could have gracefully drunk herself to death over internalized homophobia. Instead she forced a hostile town to recognize her worth.

But all that's already been done. Minor White hid his love in the shadows of rocks; the Feminist Writers of this world have too long bit their own tongues into silence; the gay storytellers have created literary transexuals and suicides for centuries.

NEAs, Broadways, the tidbit contracts that are tossed our way from mainstream publishers should be grabbed, yes, and used to make more gay art, but they can't be an end in themselves. A few days from now I'm traveling to OUTWRITE in San Francisco, a professional conference for lesbian and gay writers. One to two thousand of us are expected to attend. This is the dawn of an industry, the flexing of a power in ourselves, a strong voice comprised of the screams of angry feminists and the protests of persons with AIDS, the laughter of comic writers and our own honest sobs as we read our stories. We are storytellers flooding the world with gay tales.

I heard a straight critic recently comment that nothing exciting has happened in literature for decades. *Don't you read?* I wanted to ask. Don't you know there is an enormous literary movement, a groundswell of pen-wielding gays you can no longer ignore whether we write politely or not?

No, this isn't about Robert Mapplethorpe, or free speech, but isn't it interesting that the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D. C. lost exactly 10 percent of its membership by cancelling Mapplethorpe's exhibit? Ten percent: a familiar figure.

The ten percent that won't shut up for money or fame any more. The ten percent that — between typing letters or seeing clients or being ill — finds a way to create an art and a culture with its own rewards.



A PORTLAND TRADITION

designed for active-wear and generously cut for comfort, these garments are prewashed and preshrunk for long lasting fit. (they're as comfortable as they look).



796-0725
404 NW 10th
Mon-Sat 10-4

enjoy life,
eat in more
often!

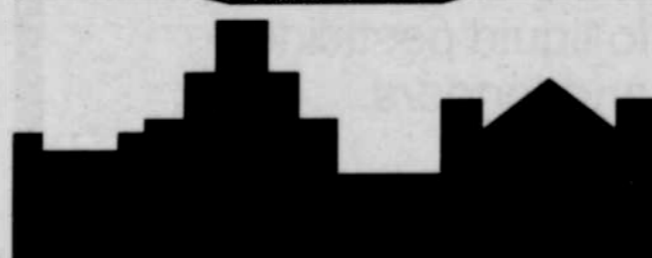


"take out"

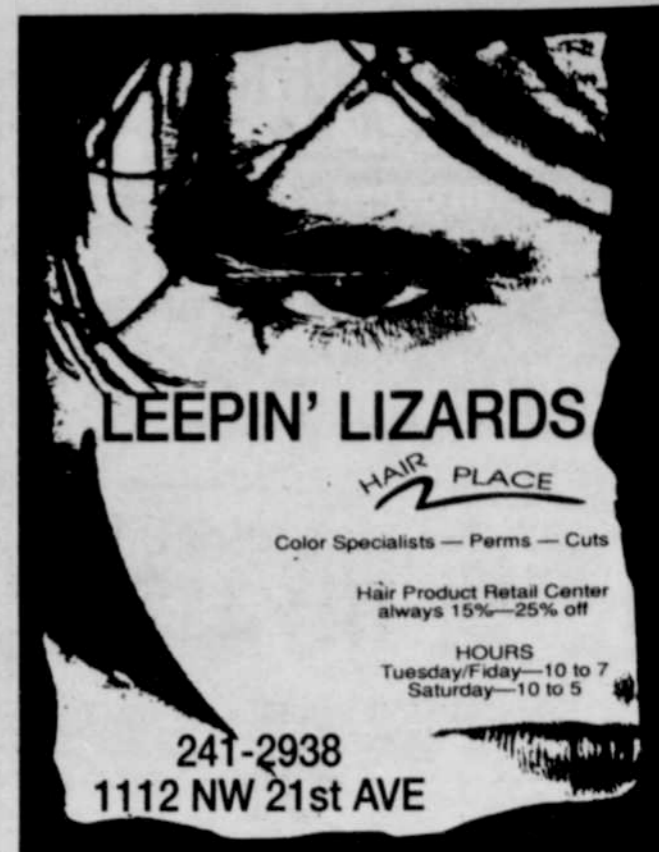
Fresh pasta and sauces, salads, prepared foods, cheeses, fine oils and vinegars; great values in imported and domestic wines.

3731 SE Hawthorne
Portland, OR 97214
(503) 232-1010

DOWNEY
INSURANCE AGENCY, INC.



Bridget I. Downey
P.O. Box 40626
Portland, OR 97240
610 S.W. Broadway, #408
(503) 228-8327



Legal Alternatives

Divorce: \$65.00

Save up to 50% on Filing Fees, no court appearances, no extra charge for children or property.

Wills: \$45

Business Incorporation: \$75

Bankruptcy: \$75

Complete preparation of all legal documents. Thousands successfully prepared.

Legal Alternatives
(503) 255-7435

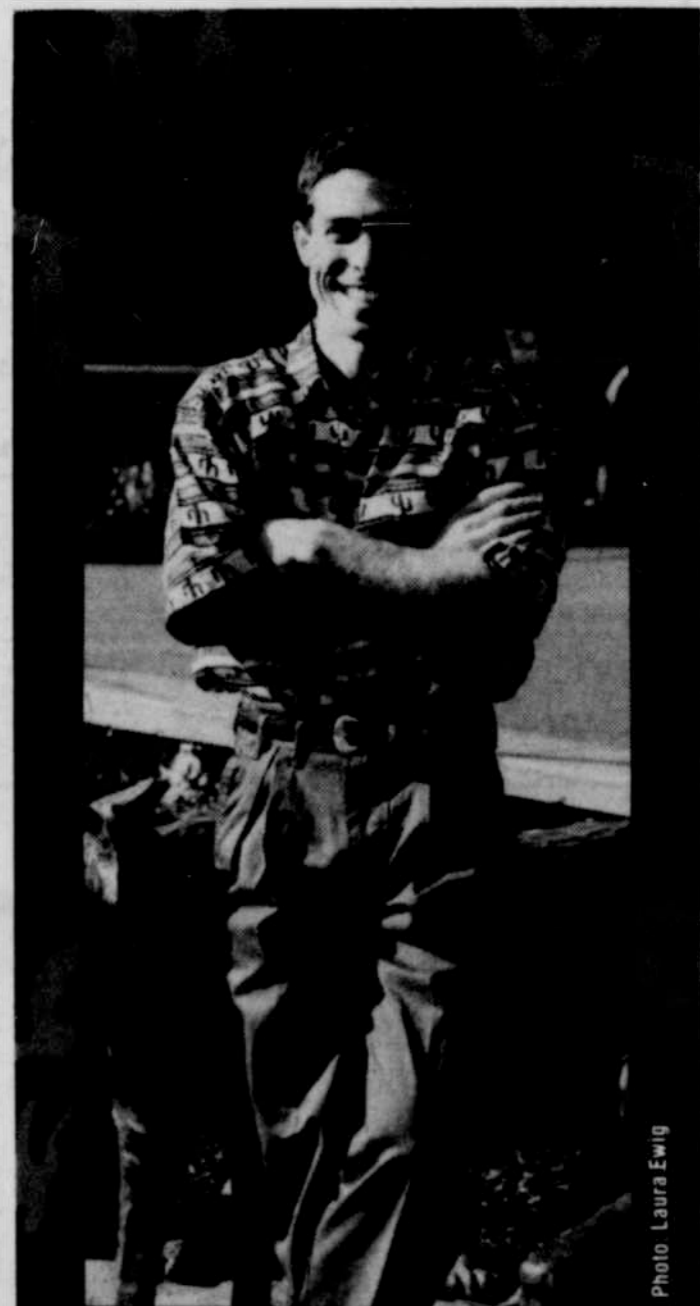


Photo: Laura Ewig

gazelle
NATURAL FIBRE CLOTHING

54 SW 2nd • 228-1693 • Mon-Thur 10-7 • Fri 10-9 • Sat-Sun 10-6

just out ▼ 25 ▼ April 1990

just out

Oregon's complete lesbian and gay connection.