

Talkapella

The genius behind talkapella shares the struggle of creating a new performance art

by Mare Davis

Zoa Smith, creator of "talkapella," which she describes as "contemporary urban storytelling for adults," is busy rehearsing with B.J. Castleman for a new show, which will open March 25 at Dream's Well Studio. "I'm really jazzed," she says.

Performance poetry is hot these days. With rap music, beat poetry and poetry contests called "slams" playing to large audiences all over the country, Smith is encouraged about the future of her talkapella, which combines words, performance and electronic effects. "It could happen for me now," she says.

MUSIC

B.J. Castleman's keyboards add synthesized music to talkapella. Smith and Castleman first worked together on Artquake last year, and the collaboration was so successful they decided to continue. Now they rehearse several hours every week, experimenting with music and text to create new pieces for the show.

Smith reads the words to Castleman in her own natural rhythm. Castleman picks up the feeling of the text and improvises instruments and melody as Smith reads. "The thing that's most exciting about working with B.J. is that we're both very intuitive about our work. Sometimes we just flow together into the same energy. We connect on an intuitive level and the work really happens."

Other times the rhythm Smith envisioned when she wrote the words doesn't work for Castleman, so they try out different rhythms and instruments until both are satisfied. Castleman develops the type of sound, the kind of music and a general melody line for each piece in rehearsal, but the spirit of collaboration and improvisation continues into performance. "B.J. says the easiest way for her to work with me is for her to tune into the energy that's coming from me. She improvises a lot during the show."

The last few years have been difficult for Smith, and she admits that without the help of other performers and the support of her audience, talkapella might have died.

In 1989 Smith's relationship of seven years ended, and after years of sobriety, she started drinking again. "Drinking has been a lifetime struggle for me. I had been sober all the years of that relationship, but I couldn't handle the pain of the breakup. Drinking was the only way I knew to take care of myself at the time." Alcohol made it hard to stay focused and disciplined, but finally it was Smith's work that sobered her up. "I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't had art to bring me back. It gave me a purpose. I zeroed in on the work to stay alive and stop drinking. Now the high I get from creating art and performing is my drug of choice. The adrenaline rush, the high of experiencing the audience, the energy that's raised, that's the drug I crave now."

By early 1991 Smith was sober again and happy in a new relationship she describes as a "place of resting." But she faced a new challenge

when the Oregon Citizens Alliance mounted its public attack on gay men and lesbians. She admits that Ballot Measure 9 sometimes made it scary to be an out lesbian performer. Even closer to home, a man who lived downstairs from her shot himself in the head, and her neighbors fought so violently that Smith says she couldn't even be comfortable in her own backyard. "It brought things home to me about the violence in the world. It was so right there in my face. The violence of the city and people's lives sent me into despair. I didn't know if I wanted to participate anymore. I wanted to go off to a cabin in the woods and forget the city, forget talkapella."

Then her grandmother died, and Smith lost the one person in her "blood family" who had supported her as an artist. "My grandmother always asked me about my art and was always proud of me. She'd never even seen a performance, but she would periodically send me twenty bucks and say, 'Use this for the show.'" With her grandmother's death, Smith faced her first experience of losing someone close to her. "It changed my life. It made me think about my own life, about death. Everyone talks about the miracle of life, but what about the miracle of death? Why don't we talk more about this?"

Smith began to meet the people she needed to give her work new energy and confidence. In the summer of 1993 she collaborated with dancer and choreographer Judy Patton and sculptor Christine Bourdette on a show at Portland State University. Last November she and Castleman performed together at the First Tuesday Coffeehouse. "It was a full house and everyone loved it." And Smith's mother was in the audience. "It was the first show anyone in my family had been to, so I was really excited about that.

I was never sure how my family felt about me. But after the show, after my mom got a chance to see what I've been doing with my life, she was real supportive. She told me how creative and courageous she thought I was. She said that, for the first time, she understood why I did it—when she saw the audience and felt the kind of energy that was there that night. So that gave me a little kick too, and an emotional boost to keep on."

Now, after a time of re-evaluation and rest, Smith says she has learned from the experience. "I need to recover. I need a personal life that isn't public. I need time to relax and rest, and I'm doing that now. Since I have this new lifestyle, and I'm taking care of myself, I'm a lot more productive." She also feels the content of her work has changed. "In the beginning I was focused on a particular topic, oftentimes a political idea. Now I'm searching for the meaning of life. It's a more spiritual quest I'm on. So the work has become more humanitarian, more head-trippy, more Zen. I'm not trying to solve problems anymore. I'm asking more questions." And she is excited again about her future and the future of talkapella. "B.J. and I work well together. I'd like to work with other musicians too. I'd like to make the sound even more electric, maybe add electric guitars, percussion, horns and violins. I envision a full band at some point, but always a focus on the content, the text, the sound of the words, the talkapella. I know this is something that will grow."



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