

INTERVIEW

CATCHING UP WITH TIM MILLER

As he nears 40, the performance artist is revealing both his body and his soul

by William J. Mann

In 1990, Tim Miller—naked butt and all—was spread out in *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Vanity Fair* and nearly every gay magazine around the country, as well as on the evening news. That's when John Frohnmayer, then the head of the National Endowment for the Arts, denied funding to him, as well as to three others, on the basis that their work was "indecent." The four artists—in addition to Miller, they included Holly Hughes, Karen Finley and John Fleck—decided to sue, and promptly launched a nation-

Books

wide debate over the public funding of art, not to mention a drawn-out series of court cases.

Since then, as the world has changed, so has Miller. Today, gay activism is not so much concerned with screaming in the streets but about more personal struggles—within relationships, our communities and ourselves—to enact change in the world. He is still political, still challenging the system. But his focus these days is on the personal, exploring the nuances and complexities of gay life at the end of the millennium.

"It's time, I think, that we as gay men look inside more, look at our relationships and the complex soup of feelings within," he says from his home in Venice, Calif. "We have been through a lot in the last years, and it's a good moment to begin looking more deeply at who we are, where we have been and where we might want to go in the future."

Miller's work has always been both intensely political and deeply personal. Known for getting naked on stage and sitting on the lap of some unsuspecting audience member, he's never had a reputation for subtlety. When he performed his performance piece "My Queer Body" to standing-room-only crowds all over the country, it may have been his "NEA Four" notoriety that sold tickets—along with the promise that he'd reveal his adorable butt, legs and stomach—but it was the fierce message of noncomplicity that one walked away with.

That message reverberates strongly in his first book, *Shirts & Skin*, published this fall by Alyson Books. As part of a more personal approach to his art and activism, Miller has penned this memoir/novel/essay collection to take stock of gay life in the 1990s. He charts, with insightful and hilarious passage, the tumultuous ride we've been on for the past 10 years. Even more importantly, he points a direction toward the future.

Your book *Shirts & Skin* draws a good deal from the stories in your recent shows "My Queer Body," "Naked Breath" and "Fruit Cocktail." What's been the evolution from one show to the other and from the stage to the page?

"My Queer Body" was kind of peak, culture-war terrain, highly inflated politics. I think "Naked Breath" was a little humbler. It was made after the demise of ACT UP, with AIDS feeling much more complicated and permanent. In some ways that piece was really about blood, about intimacy—moving away from political cheerleading or prognosticating. It was far more personal in many ways: "I remember the day I cut off the end of my finger and was comforted by my boyfriend John, who's since died of AIDS." I think I was getting more interested in being more literary—the source was more the writing.

And then "Fruit Cocktail" was really diving into personal memoir, because I was writing that piece for Patrick Merla's book [*Boys Like Us*]. It was the first time I'd ever really made a whole show that was around one narrative, a 48-hour

period of my life when I was 18 and coming out and having sex. So I think these pieces, this highly literary solo performance work I've been doing, helped me dive more into the writing, getting more specific and hopefully a little more nuanced and honest with all this stuff.

Do you feel you're moving from being a performer to a writer? You were always a writer



obviously, in that you wrote your own pieces, but are you getting to a place where you'd define yourself as a writer over a performer?

I would say that this book is by far the most exciting and creative thing I've ever done. You know, I'm also 39, and realizing there's a real frustration in making all these performances that then disappear. I love the fact that I can write the stories down and people can then read them, and I don't have to run around and take off my clothes and scream to make it happen. That's actually quite appealing for me right now.

In other words, you don't want to be taking your clothes off and screaming when you're 40.

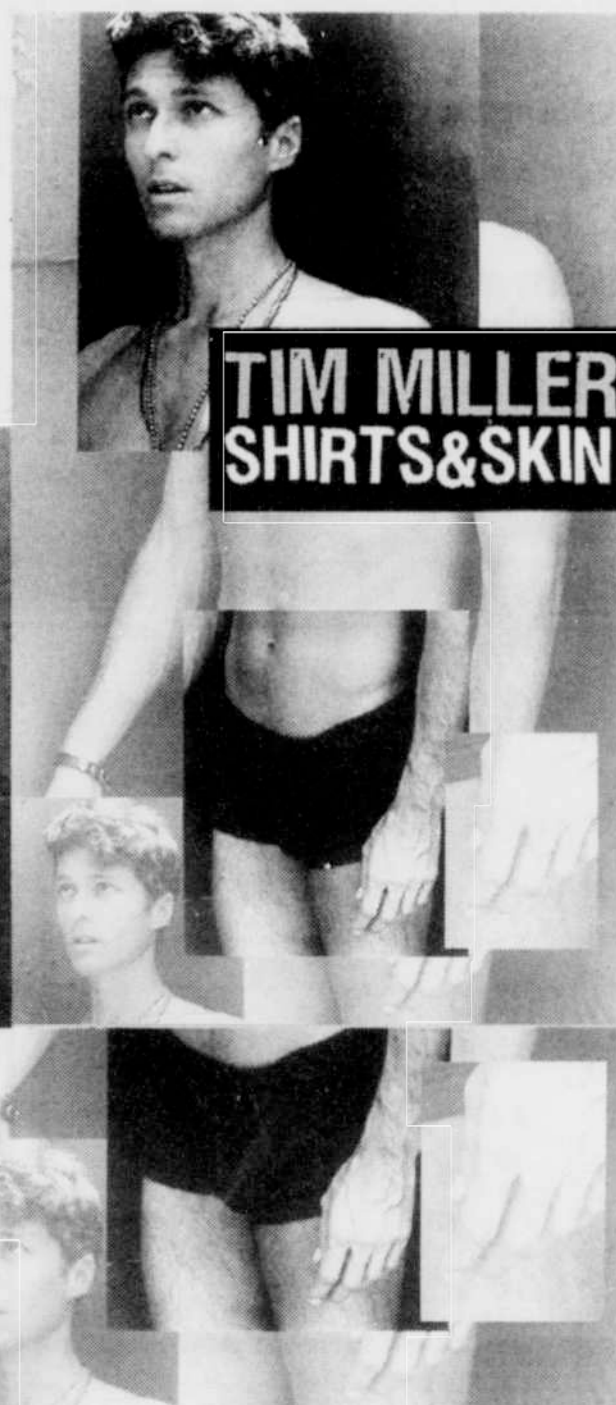
Oh, I hope I'll still be doing that. But I also like the idea that people will be able to read this stuff, too. It just feels like a new focus. My writing has always been a strong part of my work. It's just really jumped forward. The performing is still a huge part of who I am. In fact, I've created a new performance of excerpts from my book and I'll be traveling all over the country doing this new performance also called "Shirts & Skin."

Why "Shirts & Skin"? What does the title draw us toward?

As I worked on the stories, I was struck by how important it seemed what kind of shirt I was wearing in each time of life—Patti Smith T-shirt in one year and Silence=Death in another. These shirts became big identity markers for me. This mixed in with a powerful memory of a day during Phys Ed in high school when our coach divided us boys into the two teams, the Shirts and the Skins, which at the time hit me like a cinder block of being exposed as a shirtless queer boy. The book is a journey through my life and this dirty laundry of these shirts.

The book deals a great deal with sex and relationships. This seems to be the new frontier for gay men in the '90s.

In my life, sex and love have been the site of my greatest learning and change. I have discovered a lot about myself through the sweaty sex places I have gone to. *Shirts & Skin* is really a tribute to the men who have journeyed with me, fought with me,



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—Tim Miller

fucked with me. I have tried in this book to chart the shifting ways I have intimately related to other men in my life. The book is a lot about relationships and what we call them and how we create them and define them.

It seems we're at a moment where we need to tell ourselves some new stories about relationships.

I agree. The old narratives told us that you would meet your dream man. Or that you or your boyfriend would get sick and die. These were very important stories for us to tell in books and performances, but a much more complicated narrative is that we keep living, keep having complicated relationships. Your book, *The Men from the Boys*, explores this space in a way that I found incredibly useful. I was also going through changes in a relationship of many years and I needed to read that story you told in your book. *Shirts & Skin* is about that too—how our relationships become more complicated as we get older but how we don't exile them, or sever them. How we meet new people who challenge us in new ways. How we discard old formulas because they don't work. Millennial things like that.

And up until recently there hasn't been a lot of literature about this.

You know, in a way, AIDS put that whole discussion on hold. I think you're right, it is a new frontier, something we need to be talking about, writing about. People are living longer. It's almost shocking how little writing there is out there around the intricacies of our relationships—how they change, what they mean, how we feel.

And create new models.

Yes. I'm looking at how relationships don't

have to be about merging totally into another person. A relationship could be about being a teacher, having loving intimate lovers, or about having a hub of friends. Although it's interesting how much being a lover—having a relationship—really is centered around sharing a space together, creating a daily routine. That's very important. I've lived in that kind of "marriage mode," and it's a good way to live life. But it's full of very hard places and feelings too.

The last chapter of *Shirts & Skin* is the most revealing, where the book goes into your current relationships with writer Doug Sadownick and Alistair McCartney, a young performance artist from Australia. They're both in your life today. It gets into the whole struggle gay men have about defining our relationships. "First lover." "Ex-lover." "Current lover."

"Old dog." "New trick." [Laughter] This final chapter doesn't have the distance in time that much of the other work has. It was the hardest part to write. *Shirts & Skin* ends with the story about my situation in the last three years where the old model of my marriage with Doug—with lots of men on the side—no longer worked for me. I feel like I've entered a time that is more sober and complicated. A time where I am more deeply in relation to myself at the same time as in two very different relationships: my changed yet ongoing 15-year connection with Doug and my relationship the last three years with my boyfriend, Alistair.

The final chapter in the book is also called "Shirts and Skin," which is about this very bizarre coincidence that when I met Alistair in London he was wearing the exact same shirt that was Doug's favorite, a most consecrated shirt portraying the Jewish kabbala. I've only seen two of these shirts in my life, and it was Alistair's favorite shirt as well. I have been in a relationship firestorm these last years that has really challenged and changed me. Today, we all three do our laundry at my house, and so often these shirts are right next to each other. It's actually quite a lovely image. The shirts of these two men feel quite alive.

I live by myself these days in relation to both these men, though still with the increasingly sage-like dog, Buddy. Doug refers to me as his "Former Current Boyfriend" or "Soul Buddy." I am extremely close to Doug. He's the man I grew up with. But I've also opened myself to Alistair, a young man who has shaken my world in many good ways. There is lots of loss and hurt in all of this but a great deal of new life as well.

So after the book and after the tour, will there be more writing?

Yeah, I'm working on another book, without having the burden of telling my sprawling life story. It's a novel with a real limited time span and thinly veiled "fictional" characters. I also teach a lot. I'm a professor at Cal State Los Angeles, and still artistic director at Highways [a performance space in Santa Monica], battling the odds of non-profit surviving into the new millennium. Alistair and I have been creating a performance duet called "Carnal Garage" that premiered in San Francisco last spring. It's full of great physical performance stuff like burning body hair and hooking our cocks together with battery jumper cables.

It's good to know we haven't lost the Tim Miller naked body shock theater.

No, no. It may just be dawning.

Tim Miller will perform "Shirts & Skin" on Saturday, Oct. 11, at 8 pm at Theater! Theatre!, 3430 SE Belmont St. Tickets are \$12 in advance at Jelly Bean and Fastixx outlets (charge by phone at 224-8499) and \$14 at the door. He will be reading from his new book on Friday, Oct. 10, at 7:30pm at Reading Frenzy, 921 SW Oak St. The reading is free. William J. Mann is the author of *The Men from the Boys*. His new book, *Wisecracker: The Life and Times of William Haines*, Hollywood's First Openly Gay Star, will be published by Viking in February.