

How do you explain the meaning of a Zen koan? Surely not by writing a formal, structured essay about it.

How do you dramatize the story of a Zen master's life? Surely not by beginning at the beginning and ending at the end.

The Posture Queen portrays the life of Tommy "Issan" Dorsey, a onetime drug-abusing drag queen who eventually became one of the country's most respected and adored Zen masters. It is a dynamic, multisensory exploration of his journey of transformation, but the story does not unfold in a linear way.

The audience enters the theater space to find four Buddhist monks meditating before altars that are odd assemblages of hats, shoes, shirts and coats. The action begins as Issan, the master, approaches the meditators, who then rise and join him for a lesson. But with just a few changes in costume, the scene shifts right before our eyes and the monastic room becomes a sleazy bar, in which Issan, now Tommy Dee, an elegant drag queen, vamps to the song "Hard Hearted Hannah."

The pattern is set. The play unfolds as a series of episodes, each of which begins in the monastery but then leaps across space and time to reveal more and more of Dorsey's story.

Although the staging is rich in sights and sounds, the production is somewhat understated, almost minimalist. It takes only a black dress and pumps and a small feathered hairpin to change Issan into Tommy Dee. No wig, no makeup, no glitter. But it works, thanks in no small part to actor Marc Weaver's skill in matching his posture and his movements to his character's changing roles.

Similarly, the monks become sailors just by draping themselves in middy collars and wearing navy hats. And, of course, by adding

From spotlight to inner light

The Posture Queen tells the true story of a drag queen who found enlightenment

BY ANDY SIMON

some swagger to their steps.

A hospital gurney is an omnipresent prop. It becomes a bar, a kitchen table, an altar, even a four-passenger car, without ever ceasing to be a gurney. Given we know Dorsey died of AIDS, the gurney haunts every scene with the foreshadowing that it eventually will return to its hospital function and become a deathbed.

The aural environment that envelops the production makes a significant contribution to the play's success. It is the work of soundscape artists Michael Northam and Seth Nehil, for whom *The Posture Queen* is a theatrical debut; their previous work has been mostly in connection with art installations.

Their sounds include almost comic accompaniments to the actors' pantomimed door knocks, for instance, but most of its impact is more subtle. Nonmelodic music creates a meditative sound space for the monastery scenes, while other unrecognizable noises create tension and heighten the drama at pivotal moments.

Light is also a major element of the play. At times the action is lit only by ritual flames, at others by flashlights.

Moving images are projected on a winglike screen. At one point the real-action choreography interacts with the video images, a stunning effect.

There are, however, some problems with the play. The subject matter itself creates one for writer/director Jonathan Walters.

How do you portray Zen enlightenment? Even worse, given Dorsey's transformation from a hard-hearted, cross-dressing hustler to a Zen master took place mostly on the inside, how can it be shown on the stage?

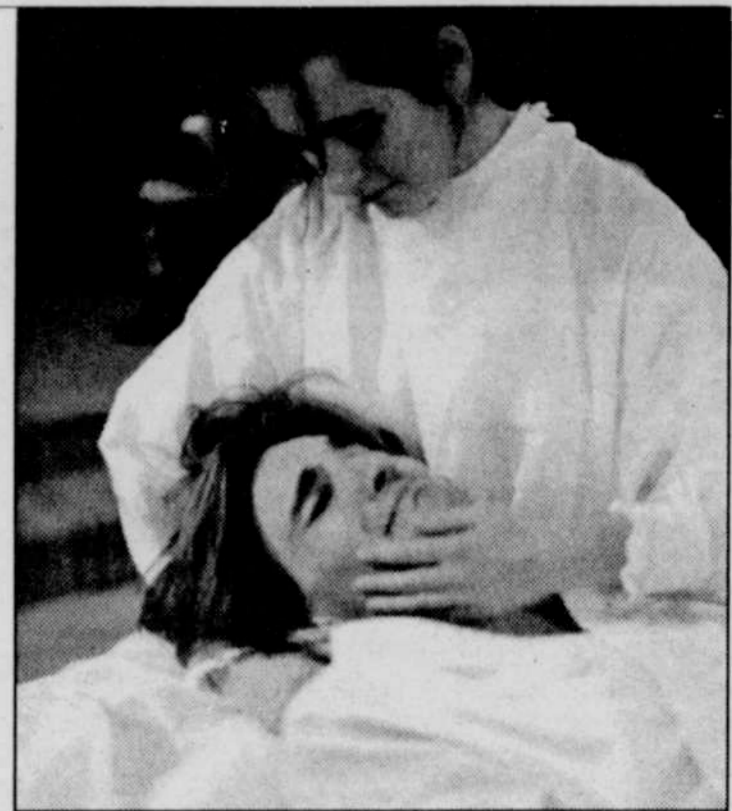
Walters wisely avoids focusing on these aspects of his story in ways that might seem trite or clichéd. But perhaps he avoids too much.

It is one thing to ask the audience to change the settings in their imaginations with just the help of a few props and costume changes. But it is another to ask us to fill in the central drama of the piece, to figure out for ourselves just what changed Dorsey and why he became so adored by his followers.

On the other hand, maybe we demand too much if we ask for explanations that satisfy our minds. After all, the point of a Zen koan might just be that there is no point.

Portland is fortunate to be home to several theater companies that work hard at pushing the boundaries of what can be done on the stage. With *The Posture Queen*, Hand 2 Mouth takes its place among those that give us much more than a story set in dialogue.

Surprisingly, several of the artists collaborating on this piece are theater rookies. Set designer Sara Thompson is a multimedia artist and builder; this is her first set. Michael Mateyko is a talented video artist and filmmaker; this is his first video projection work for theater. Choreog-



Faith Helma comforts Marc Weaver

rapher Mark Hayes is a dancer/performer with an international reputation.

Walters brings it all together. He is proud that almost all of the events portrayed on the stage are true to life. But turning real life into art takes creative vision, and Walters does it in a way that, despite its problems, results in an exciting and rewarding theater experience.

In addition to his vision, the production features fine acting all around, a stimulating sound and light environment and even a little Zen wisdom. It doesn't answer all the questions it raises, but it's a great play to see with a friend—you'll have a lot to talk about on the way home. **J**

THE POSTURE QUEEN plays 8:30 p.m. Thursday to Sunday and 4 p.m. Sunday through Sept. 2 at Rose City Ballroom, 700 N.E. Dekum St. Tickets are \$8-\$10 from 503-283-3311.

ANDY SIMON is a teacher and free-lance writer who lives in Southeast Portland.

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