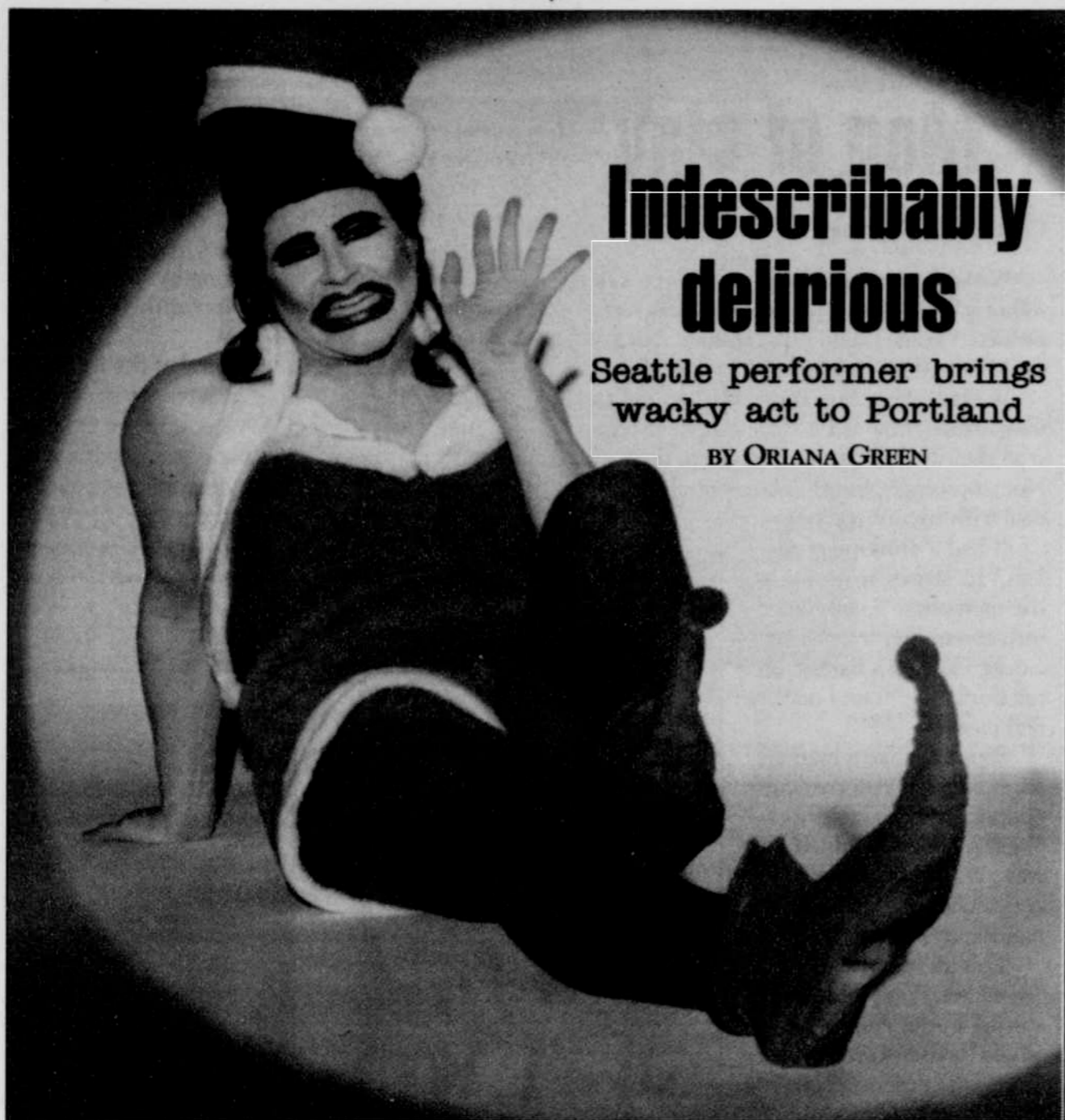


THEATER



Indescribably delirious

Seattle performer brings wacky act to Portland

BY ORIANA GREEN

Dina Martina is one big elf

It's hard for even me to appropriately describe her," creator Grady West says of his alter ego, Dina Martina. "You want to say drag and comedy, but that pigeonholes her. She's not a standup comic, and there's no lip-syncing," he further explains. Or not.

I feel better knowing West can't capsulize what Dina does, because even after chatting with him for a half-hour and viewing some videotape of his performance, I'm not sure what to say, either. So let's start at the beginning.

"In '89 a friend was creating a performance piece called *A Taudry Lounge Act Peepshow*. The audience literally watched us through peepholes in a wall, and all we could see were eyes peering at us through the holes," West recalls. "It was the perfect setting for me to overcome my stage fright. Luckily, people enjoyed Dina."

So for the next few years whenever people put together cabarets they'd ask her to perform.

"I totally got wiggled out once I could see the audience," West confides. "But after four years I realized I liked doing it, so then I started doing it more often and put more effort into it. My act used to be all improv. Some nights it worked, and some it didn't."

Now, after 13 years, Oregonians finally will get a chance to experience the weirdness that is Dina when she plays Echo Theater on Nov. 24.

"It's a special show just for Portland: *The Dina Martina Holiday Show*, about all the holidays of the year," West enthuses. "Dina is creating a new kind of holiday," he promises.

So what exactly does she do onstage? Well, first you have to adjust to Dina's appearance. Looking a bit like the love child of Tiny Tim and Sandra Bernhard in a dress no respectable drag queen would wear to take out the garbage, she is a study in contradictions.

"She doesn't realize how ridiculous she looks. She has no self-awareness basically. But she's very sweet," West says tenderly, always talking about Dina as a separate entity.

And who does her makeup? Or a better question might be: Does she own a mirror? "Dina does her own, inspired by Clarabelle the clown," West admits without ego.

Then there's her singing talent or, more to the point, her lack thereof. Has she ever been heckled? "No, not really. She can never really sing, but luckily no one has booed her off," he says protectively.

West describes the show as a mixed bag. "It's singing, it's talking, it's film...Dina gives out bizarre gifts including Dina records, 3-D photos of Dina and scarves by Vera," he explains. "I grew up in Seattle in the '60s and '70s, and I was either glued to TV or Top 40 radio. So Dina is an entertainer. That's all she knows. Though as a teen she worked at a Radio Shack," he adds, fleshing out her bio.

The tape I viewed showed Dina prancing around the stage singing something I didn't recognize while alternately playing air violin on an acoustic guitar and interrupting herself with various asides—which seem to be the real meat of the show.

West says Vegas was a big influence on him. "I fell in love with it and was also repulsed by it."

Because West has been playing Dina for so long now, does she age as he ages, or is she ageless? He pauses to consider this, then says, "People describe her now as an aging, washed-up Vegas never-been."

West feels fortunate to share his life with Dina—and only Dina. "Yeah, I'm definitely a fag...available but not interested in dating. I'm gay through and through, though I really identify as me, who happens to be a gay man," he says with a strong sense of himself. "My mom's in the front row cheering me on, and I'm really lucky to have such a supportive family."

So I asked West to give us his best pitch why someone should come meet Dina. "The two universal things people say who like her are: They're pleasantly surprised because she's not bitchy or catty or mean-spirited. And that there's no X-rated element at all," West claims. "I never set out to do that. It just happened that way."

Rather like Dina herself. **J**

DINA MARTINA takes over Echo Theater, 1515 S.E. 37th Ave., 8 p.m. Nov. 24. Tickets are \$17 at the door or \$14 in advance from *Gai-Pied*, the *Gold Door* or *Fastix*. For more info call 503-203-3305.

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