

PEOPLE

Dark lessons

Slam poet and one-woman dyke show comes back to Portland

BY JODI DARBY

Kimberly Dark didn't always dream of being a poet. Nor did she hold lofty aspirations of becoming a performance artist. But somewhere along the way, the lesbian's work in social science and auto-ethnographic writing became performance, and those performances have brought national acclaim.

Dark will unveil her latest CD, *You Are My Singing Lesson*, to Portland audiences Feb. 22 and 27. The San Diego native has won numerous poetry slams, has been published in countless anthologies and in 2002 held the distinctive title of San Diego's poetry slam team coach.

Dark's full-length theater shows *Public Contact* and *The Butch/Femme Chronicles: Discussions with Women Who Are Not Like Me (and Some Who Are)* gracefully combine aspects of art, social science and storytelling with her smart, sexy intuitive style.

"My work sort of merged into what it is today," says Dark, who holds a master's degree in sociology. She recalls the duality and later the fusion that ultimately created her style.

"I love working in the social sciences. I love writing. But I always thought of the two as being very different. I thought, 'What if I theme and group life experiences—these emotional aspects—like data and process them scientifically?' I could see what comes from looking at these two aspects as one process."

The work is ambitious. It exhibits all of the qualities of an inquiring mind that can't be still and pushes the limits of social constructs around gender identity.

The backbone of a good performance, she asserts, is one in which people feel represented. "Good drama should mirror the lives of the audience," she says. "People who have been marginalized their entire lives—in this case



Kimberly Dark don't need no lessons on how to be hot. See her Feb. 22 or 27 in Portland.

women—need to see their lives represented and made important."

A standard in Dark's performances is audi-

ence participation. A venue can become at once a performance space, a social laboratory and a safe place for the sharing of experiences. And, as venues can vary from university auditorium to theater to coffee shop to queer bookstore, the energy and outcome of a performance can differ greatly.

"I've performed at venues where people...are convinced that they have never seen a lesbian in their lives," laughs Dark. "It's funny because here they are, in the audience, and they are surrounded by 15 to 20 lesbians! Folks learn sort of quickly through my performances that lesbians don't come in one form. The fact that I 'pass' as straight definitely challenges people's preconceptions of what a lesbian looks or acts like."

Dark's work comes from a collage of experiences and real dialogue with friends, lovers and strangers about gender and social constructs of identity. "I always write and read in the first person," she explains. "People always feel more comfortable being spoken to."

She strives to connect with individuals based on universal experience. "I've done readings where straight men and women have approached me afterward and said that they really identified with my pieces," she adds.

"That's a pretty powerful feeling for someone to take home with them. Especially someone who never dreamt that they could identify with a queer person."

Dark's latest spoken word CD combines two kinds of writing, she says. "Some of the pieces are lyric and rich in poetic imagery. I also do poetry and storytelling that's based on social research." *Singing Lesson* includes some dialogue from real people, she reveals, "much like *The Vagina Monologues*."

From one story to the next, Dark conjures images and emotions, and her delivery allows them to come with the fluidity of a carnival ride—one that shakes you up a little but leaves you wanting to ride again and again.

The devotional poem "Let Me Tell You About Style" is about a bad-ass femme who "can take the fear out of the shadows and the hollows and the predawn illusions like mere daylight never could" and "at the same time kick your ass without lifting a finger or spilling her drink."

In "Truth and God" Dark embraces silence and reminds us that some languages use the same word for "truth" and for "God." She beautifully recounts the ubiquity of both. Guitar accompaniment by San Diego musician Damon Cisneros adds layer upon layer of sensuality to this already multitiered piece.

Each poem becomes familiar—a story told from a place of mutual experience or, as Dark says, of "universal character." The words are like a balm, with imagery that soothes the ear and excites the mind. **J**

KIMBERLY DARK will perform pieces from *You Are My Singing Lesson* 7 p.m. Feb. 22 at *Touchstone Coffee House*, 7631 N.E. Glisan St., and 7 p.m. Feb. 27 at *Laughing Horse Books*, 3652 S.E. Division St.

JODI DARBY is a Portland free-lance writer.

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