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## THEATER

### The sum of Us

**Amid rampant war and an anti-gay government agenda, Tim Miller asks what the hell is wrong with us**

BY LISA BRADSHAW

California queer performance artist Tim Miller has already sent six boxes to London. He and his partner, Alistair McCartney, "have been through so much," he remarks, "moments where we thought we were going to have to leave any minute." Miller, who returns to Portland on Feb. 21 with his new one-man show, *Us*, is part of a growing number of queer binational couples who, due to a lack of family status, have difficulty living together in the United States.

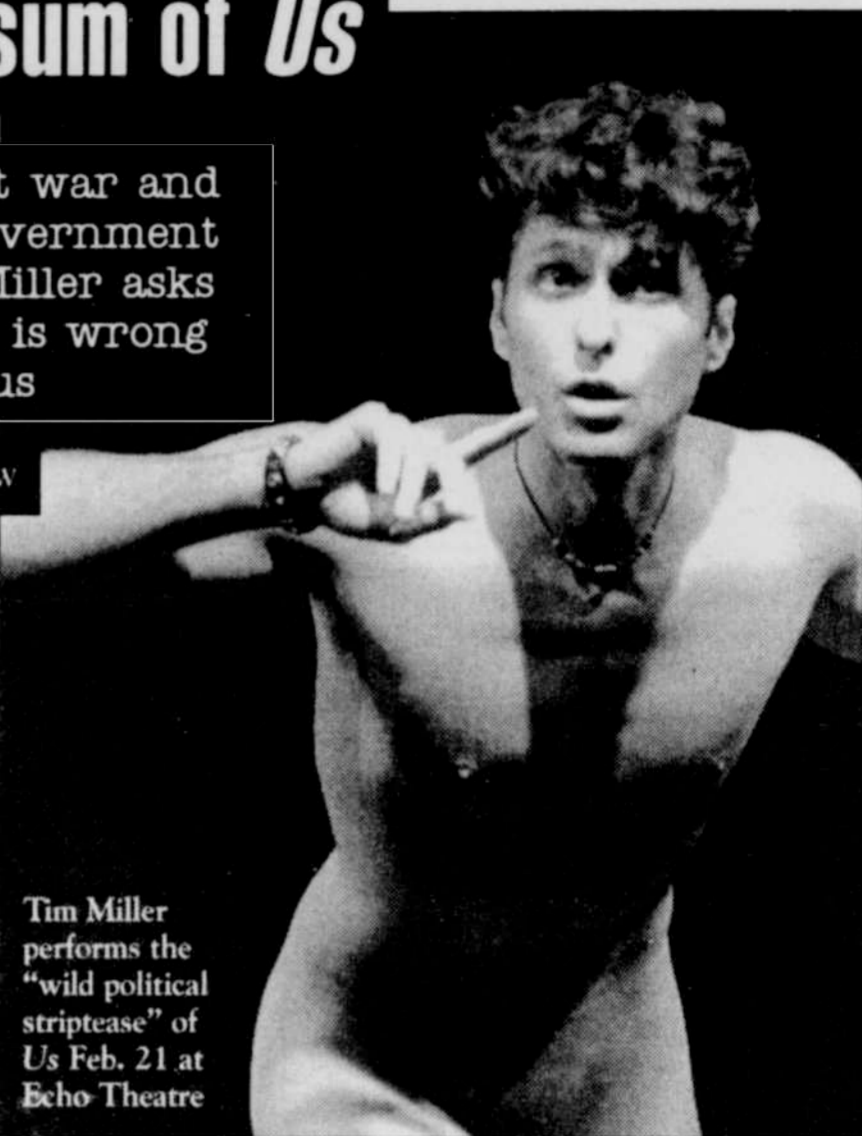
Miller's previous show, *Glory Box*, which he brought to a sold-out crowd in Portland four years ago, centered around discrimination against same-sex couples in immigration. Foreign partners of U.S. citizens must find alternatives to staying in the country when civil marriage is not an option. Miller and McCartney's alternative is "asylum," as he puts it, in England. McCartney's work visa expires in October.

*Us* is a continuation of similar themes but expanded due to an ever-expanding negative political climate for sexual minorities. "I wanted to dig more into... where do feelings of exile originate for gay people," Miller explains. "The question I keep dealing with is this 'what's wrong with us' question—both its meanings of what's wrong with lesbian and gay couples that we're treated so shabbily in America, but, of course, the bigger question all Americans should be asking: What's wrong with us—with America.... We're so far behind the rest of the Western world... certainly lesbian and gay rights in a dramatic way, but everything else—health care, prison reform, education—all the big markers of what a civilized country should actually think count."

Being born into the Vietnam War era compounded Miller's early sense of isolation at knowing he was gay. He admits to planning his own conscientious objection when he was 9 years old, complete with a map above his bed outlining how he would hitchhike to British Columbia "the minute I turned 18, before I let America destroy my life."

Now, 35 years later and in a new century, most of those old fears are back—if they ever left. "Since I've been a little kid, I never really felt secure or safe in this country. The current situation I'm in only reminds me of that. So [the show] is kind of pulling [in] some of those narratives and stories as a way of getting at this big, gnarly 'us' question."

But let's not forget that Miller is gay and, therefore, gets at the marriage equality and immigration issues "through the Broadway musical," he laughs. Having been enchanted by *Man of La Mancha*—a "beautiful, progressive, overblown utopian kind of thing"—Miller became your stereotypical musical-obsessed gay youth.



Tim Miller performs the "wild political striptease" of *Us* Feb. 21 at Echo Theatre

At the beginning of *Us*, he and McCartney are packing up to leave the country, and he has to decide what to take with him. "And that leads me to start looking at 12 boxes of Broadway musicals," he says wryly. "So there's a sweet story about wishing I had played *Oliver* in the movie musical and the year in my life when I assumed an English accent."

Miller began creating one-man performance art pieces during the Reagan administration. In 1990, during the first Bush White House, he became one of the NEA 4—artists who had their National Endowment for the Arts grants revoked by the federal government for "indecent" work. The four artists sued, and the money was eventually reinstated.

Does he ever feel like he's back in those times? "Yeah," he answers, "except it's so much worse." Fueled by a never-ending right-wing attack on queers, all Miller's dozen pieces are about "the emotional/psychological/sexual/political topography of being queer in America," he says. "That's my subject."

Although Miller attracts a mostly queer crowd to his shows, he says he never feels he's preaching to the choir. "Gay people are so still afraid to see the systems of homophobia in our country and the kind of systemic, monstrous bigotry at the heart of the Republican Party and as a tributary of our whole culture," he exclaims. "The fact is, we're really afraid to take power and actually call it like we see it."

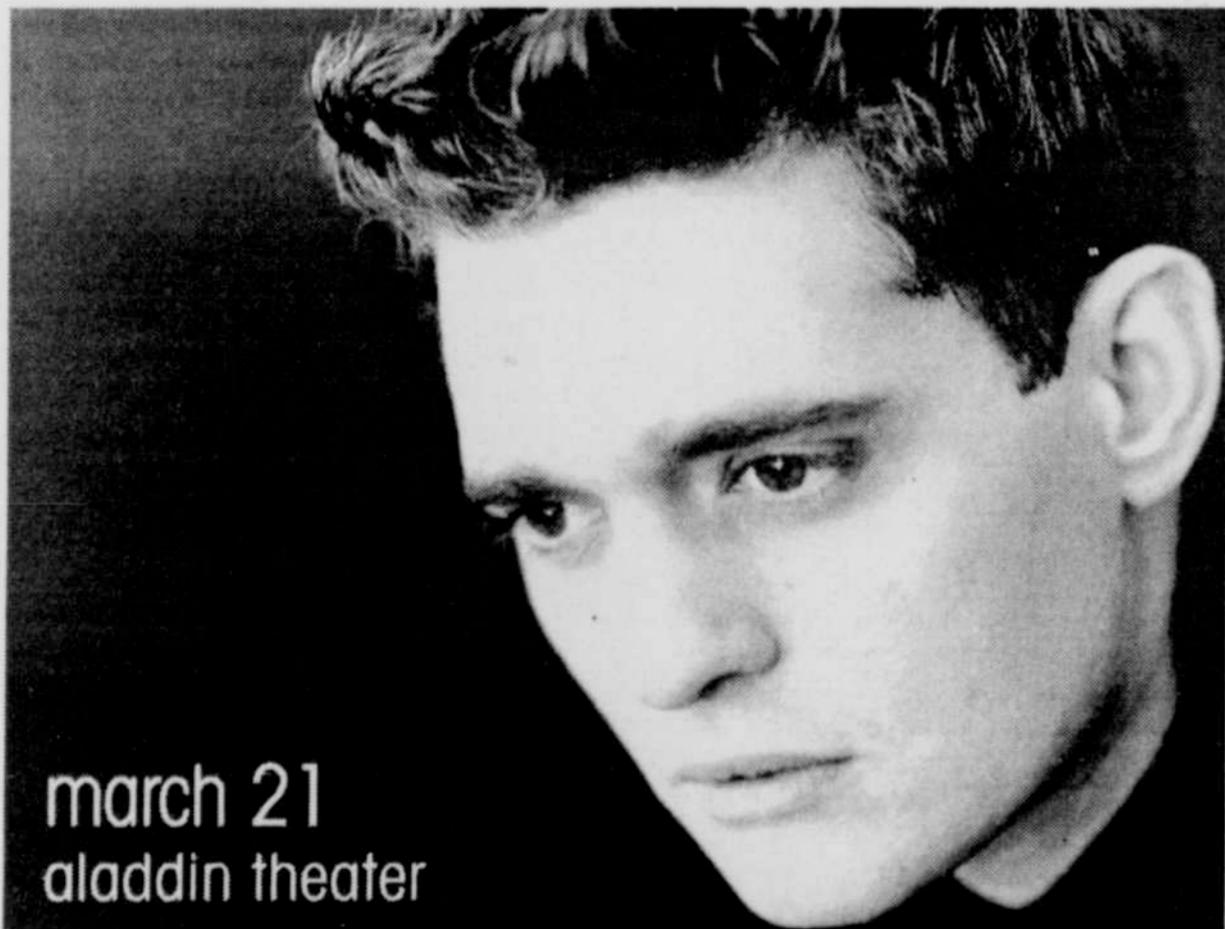
Also, wherever Miller takes one of his provocative performances, the media follow—he's on local TV or the radio or the daily paper. "When I got on *Good Morning Chattanooga* talking about marriage equality years ago, it was probably the first time in Chattanooga, Tenn., that anyone in public had ever talked about it! That is the opposite of preaching to the converted.... The performance is the tip of the iceberg." □

TIM MILLER performs *Us* 8 p.m. Feb. 21 at Echo Theatre, 1515 S.E. 37th Ave. Tickets are \$16 from *Gai-Pied*, *Gold Door*, *Music Millennium* or *TicketsWest*. Post-show reception tickets are \$5 at the door, which benefits the Portland chapter of the *Lesbian and Gay Immigration Rights Task Force*.

LISA BRADSHAW is Arts & Culture Editor of *Just Out*.

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