

HIGH PERFORMANCE

#21 THE ORIGINAL PERFORMANCE ART MAGAZINE \$5



THIS ISSUE

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EROTIC PLAY

THE ART OF SPASTIC FRANK MOORE

By LEWIS MacADAMS

HOWLING AND MOANING, Frank Moore is dragging an orange plastic pointer across a letter-covered wooden palette fastened to the arms of his motorized wheelchair using the muscles of his neck. His neck muscles, in fact, seem to be the only muscles this 38-year-old spastic performance artist has any control of. The orange pointer, attached at one end to a circa-60's era hand-tooled leather headband, spells out the words he wants to say, touching letter after letter, or pointing to a handful of simple words like "Yes, no, he, she, it," etc. that border the board's alphabet. It is exhausting to talk to this man and he knows it. The effort and concentration it takes him to spell out the answer to a simple question seems about equivalent to you or I pushing a small car around the block with our necks. At Frank Moore's side is a tall, slender, attractive woman who calls herself Linda Mac. She is Moore's wife, or one of them. They have been together for eight years, and she is paid by the state to be his attendant. Moore is 99% physically disabled, a victim of cerebral palsy and brain damage, and none of the sounds he can make are words. Linda understands a lot of what he is trying to say and often finishes the sentences he is spelling out, to his obvious approval and a visitor's palpable relief.

Sitting in a damp garage-studio behind a stucco duplex west of Berkeley High School, a house Frank and Linda share with three other adult members of his family and one child, Frank is emitting a keening sound which somehow registers as laughter, a triumphant, affecting horse-laugh of pleasure at the credits rolling down a video screen. It's the opening scene from "Fairy Tales Can Come True," a super-8 "rock-comedy" Moore wrote, directed and starred in in 1980.

Onscreen Frank Sinatra is singing the title as Moore wheels himself around Berkeley's Sproul Plaza, drooling into his matted beard and trying to look down co-ed's blouses and up their skirts. It's hopeless, though. In his Vietnam-era fatigues, Frank reads like a loser. Some girls just panic when Frank rolls up, and take off run-

ning. Others mutter embarrassed apologies. Finally, a fat, seedy-looking Australian "fairy godfather" tells Frank exactly where it's at: "Look at yew," the Aussie crows, "Yew oughta be ashamed. Clean up your act! If you'd shave that bloody beard and get some new clothes you could look like Mick Jagger! Then you'll find yourself a nice girl who'll appreciate you and look past your body."

So Frank does follow his fairy godfather's advice; and sure enough, he does look like a very, very spazzed Mick Jagger. The tempo of the film changes. Roy Orbison croons "Pretty Woman" as, on the screen, the new Frank meets a lithe beauty who soon confides in Frank that her beach boy boyfriend is a heartless oaf. Soon Frank and the girl are having lunch. Next, we see them naked together,

rolling around on a waterbed. The woman seems to enfold Frank's pale twisted body in her arms as they touch and play. There are close-ups of the woman's shoulder, her easy smile, oddly-angled shots of her thighs and of Frank's enormous tongue. It is unaccountably sexy and/or sensual to the max, a kind of grown-up light-hearted goof on *Beauty and the Beast* with a moral overtone. One imagines this a kind of spiritual training film at quadriplegic consciousness-raising sessions.

A little embarrassed, I tell Moore all this; and he is off and roaring again, twisting his body

half out of his chair. "It is used that way," he writes out with his pointer. In his orange bicycle helmet, glittering rainbow-colored legwarmers, soft blue shoes, red pants, purple quilted down vest and lavender, polka-dotted shirt over red turtle-neck over neck-brace and red beard he looks as unlike a victim as Linda—in her lilac pants, red shoes, violet sweater and multi-colored scarves—looks like a nurse. Linda gets up and puts another videocassette into the machine.

It's Frank's new tape-in-progress, a video he's been working on for less than a year, called "Erotic Play." To the music of "Memo From Turner," the Rolling Stones' theme song from the movie "Performance," a series of men and women, straight and hip, old and young (there are even a pair of very young girls—children, Linda explains, of family friends), slowly, shyly, undress. In the foreground is a box of clothes—campy cigarette holders, mini-dresses, Spanish shawls etc.—that look like residue from a bankrupt free store. The



Moore in performance with wife, Linda Mac

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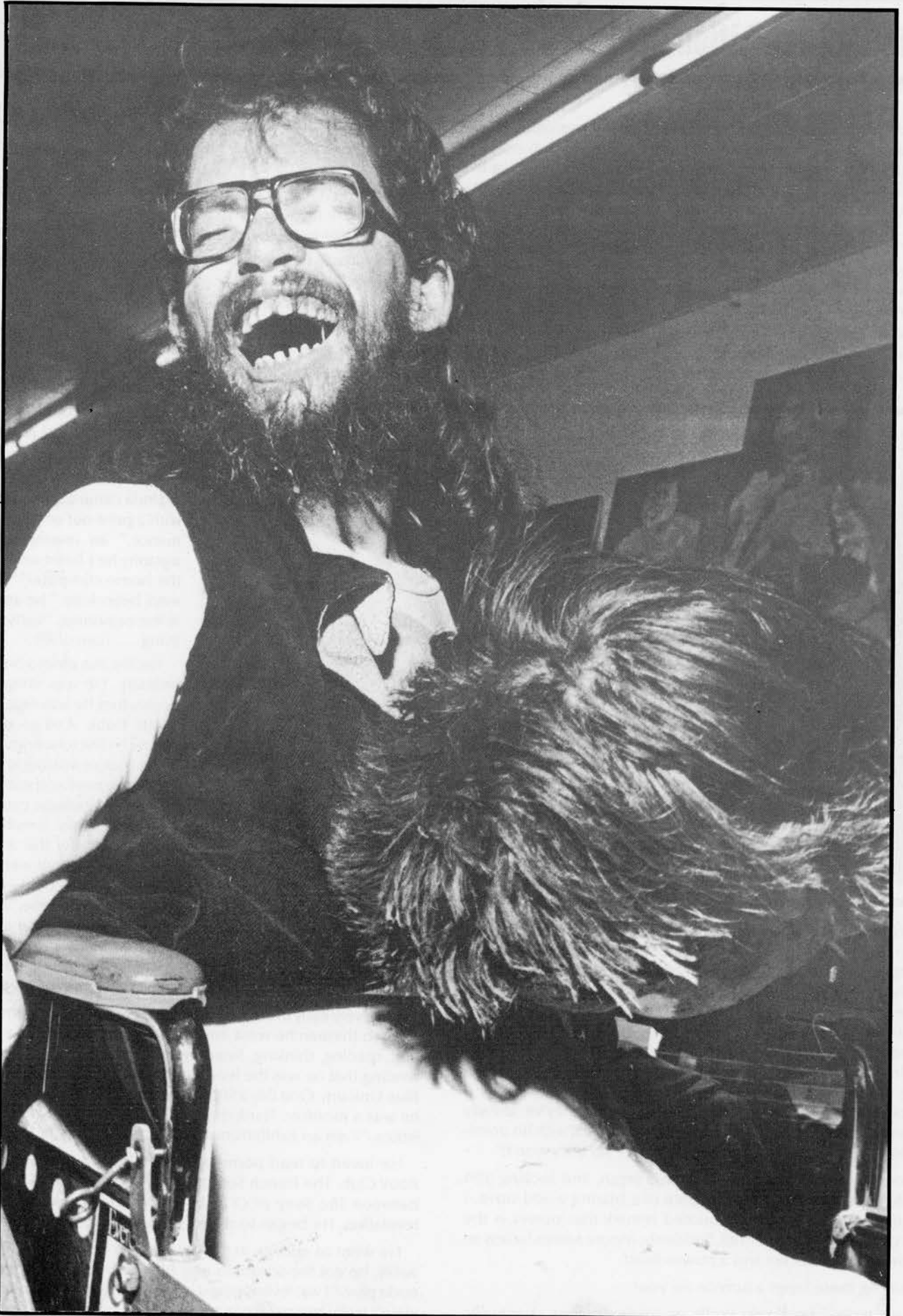


Photo: Ken Jennings

"I am an exhibitionist. I like to have people look at me."

"subjects" of the tape talk about themselves, their problems, their thoughts—whatever is going through their heads—as they put on the clothes. It is interesting and sexy to see a mini-dress worn by in succession a seven-year-old girl, a handsome man and a rather beautiful female dwarf. Some of the people are shy and some are brazen. Physically, they range from polio victims to goddesses. But Moore has an extraordinary eye for beauty in all its many guises; and every person that passes before the camera is, in his or her own way, beautiful. And because the people are awkward and natural and curiously sincere, the tape is, well, quite erotic.

Proudly, Frank spells out on his board his technique for recruiting his stars. He rolls around Sproul Plaza at UC Berkeley, his "people supermarket" with a neatly typed note taped to his wheelchair: "I

Photos: f-Stop Fitzgerald



would like to shoot you for my master's in performance/video at the San Francisco Art Institute," it reads. "I am asking people who I find attractive—although maybe not in Hollywood's concept of attractiveness, beauty, sexiness. I and my wife Linda shoot these people almost like paintings in different poses, different clothes, sometimes nude . . ." And so forth. When Moore sees somebody he wants to use he rolls up to the person in his chair and presents his offer. Interested people are asked to write down their names and phone numbers and Linda calls them up. According to Linda, if someone agrees to come over to their house, they've already decided to do a shoot. Moore yowls and spells it out with his pointer, "Most people get undressed even if they say they won't!"

Moore's eyes are his most expressive organ, and looking into them is like looking through the grate of a blazing wood stove. I think of Henry Kissinger's oft-quoted remark that power is the greatest aphrodisiac of them all. Suddenly, Moore seems far less an artist than a mind-fucker and a power-fiend.

Is making these tapes a turn-on for you?

"That's tricky," he slowly spells, as Linda watches attentively,

"because turn-on is such a loaded word."

I mean, do you get off by directing, by telling other people what to do?

"No, I direct mostly by laughing. My main direction is just to tell them to have fun."

Do you like to be in control?

"Yes, I like to be in control, but that is not the same thing as having power."

Do you consider yourself a voyeur?

Moore snorts, sighs impatiently and twists toward his wife who gets up and goes back inside.

"Voyeur is the opposite of what I do," Moore writes. "I like to get involved."

Do you consider yourself stronger than most people?

"Stronger than they think they are."

Linda came back to the garage with a print-out of "Erotic Performance," an in-process autobiography he's been working on at the home computer. "I have always been lusty," he announces at the beginning. "Lusty is love of living . . . love of life."

His life has always been extraordinary. He was living in Morocco when he was eight, he says in the book. And so overcome was he by the misery and poverty of the people shitting in the fields across the road and eating out of his family's garbage cans that he decided to do something for them—translate the Bible into Arabic. His mother was the only person Moore could communicate with at the time, and when

Moore told her his plan she laughed. Moore was so angry that when she left the room he slid out of his wheelchair and rolled out the screen door and down the steps. He got to the gate before she caught him. It was, he writes, his "first performance piece."

From very early in his life he dreamed of being a performer. From eight to thirteen he went into an "isolation period." He stayed in bed, reading, thinking, listening to the people in his house, pretending that he was the lead singer of a rock and roll band called Blue Unicorn. One day a little boy came up to him and asked him if he was a monster. Frank roared like a monster. "I was lucky," he writes. "I am an exhibitionist. I like to have people look at me."

He loved to read pornography, so he joined the Grove Press Book Club. The French Surrealist poetry that came sandwiched in between *The Story of O* and Frank Harris' biography came as a revelation. He began to dream of becoming some kind of artist.

He went to college in San Bernardino in the late 60's. Improbably, he got the school to give him permission to put on an all-nude play. "I was overfocused on sex at the time," he recalls. "But I wasn't really into sex yet in my art. I just wanted to see nude bodies

"I wanted to see people nude. And touch them. And touch them."

on stage and do things like paint them with baby food."

Unfortunately nobody wanted to be in his piece. "I learned it can be hard to get people for weird things."

Depressed, Moore dropped out of school and hit the road. He took LSD and hitchhiked to Santa Fe, then on to Boston where he joined a 350-person commune called The Brotherhood of the Spirit. He still had had no sex.

"Then the leader of the commune made a public announcement that I needed sex. Overnight, I had a few sexual experiences. It made him decide to stop thinking he was ugly; ... start thinking I was beautiful ... start acting the part. ..."

Moore met a woman and they married and left the commune for

Albuquerque. He became interested in a meditation system called Silva Mind Control. "When I thought I was ugly, nothing happened. So I decided to pretend I really believed I was beautiful. And because I managed to pretend 100%, I forgot it was just something I was pretending." Another woman came into the household. Soon, "we three admitted we were married." At that time he did his first erotic film: himself rolling naked down a hill with an "almost nude girl."

"I wanted to see people nude," he writes. "And touch them. And touch them. And create an intensity between us." He began to ask people to act out "intense erotic scenes" with him in front on a camera. Sometimes there was film in the camera, sometimes there was not; but people would tell Moore later that acting out the scenes with him helped their other relationships. People began to pay him for his time.

I asked him to explain the difference in his mind between eros and sex.

"I think of erotic as like play for kids. Erotic is like dancing, singing, judo, acting. It is natural, but we have forgotten how. In sexual relationships, eroticism is part of that relationship. But it is possible to enjoy erotic relations without sex. I just don't know what to call it. We don't even have a slot in our lives for relating physically without sex."

Are you saying eros is basically for children?

"It's child-like, not childish."

If eros is child-like, what is adult?

"It's a child-like quality in people, particularly in relating physically."

Why don't you call what you do therapy?

"I have used counseling, but it got in the way of what I wanted to do. That's why I turned to performance. When you counsel, you have to deal with peoples' problems instead of focusing on fun."

Do you see what you're doing as entertainment?

"I hope so. I'm not down on entertainment."

After New Mexico, Moore and his family moved on to New York where they started The Theatre of Human Melting. The Theatre did 48-hour "processes." "We did chanting, moving in slow motion,

dressing and undressing a lot." The actors would write out what they wanted to happen and Moore would direct it. The script, he says, was just a prop. "The real course of action is shaped by the performer, so the flow of the piece will go forward and deeper."

The Theatre of Human Melting broke up, and Moore and his family moved back to Berkeley. One day he rolled into a travel agency and he met Linda. "When she leaned over the counter I looked down her blouse and asked her to have lunch with me." They were soon married, too.

The interview stopped for a minute as a glowing red-headed little boy came into the garage looking for his bike.

Is that yours and Linda's kid?



Photo: f-Stop Fitzgerald

Moore spells out "He has five parents instead of two."

But he's your kid?

"Koala is my son."

Moore and his family started doing events like costume parades and concerts. They opened a storefront and taught workshops and more 48-hour processes. They went to shopping centers and handed out questionnaires with questions like, "If it was OK to show your breasts in public, how would you show them?" All of this led them to San Francisco's North Beach and a former Filipino nightclub turned punk-rock landmark called the Mabuhay Gardens.

Nursed along by the Mabuhay's inspired promoter, a sort of Diaghilev of sleaze named Dirk Dirksen, what Moore began to call his Outrageous Beauty Review opened the show at the Fab Mab every Saturday night for three years. Billing themselves as "the dirty foam on the new wave," Moore and his players amused, inspired, infuriated or bored thousands of mostly bewildered people with their strange theatrical collage. At times the Outrageous Beauty Review was pathetic, a sick joke. At times it was hilarious. At all times it was sexy, because the performers wanted to be, and in the

A cthonic figure, fiery eyes, a laugh like a wild pig



main they were ordinary people whom Frank Moore had somehow given permission.

A typical night at the Outrageous Beauty Review would go like this: while outraged and disbelieving punkers rained down hors d'oeuvre popcorn (and the occasional beer bottle) on the performers, a female Elvis impersonator would do her number, followed by a guy in his underpants who hurled himself first into a bowl of warm noodles, then into a vat of chocolate pudding. After that, a trio of half-naked white girls writhed out an imitation of the Supremes accompanied by an incompetent rock and roll quartet kachunking out chords. For the grand finale, Moore himself was wheeled out between two female attendants, all clad in sort-of uniforms of the Green Berets. Boxes of dry ice were opened and lit by pulsating strobes as the attendants marched in place, singing "The Ballad of the Green Berets" accompanied by Frank Moore's howls. As the cacophony rose to a crescendo the performers began wrestling each other to the ground, tearing off each other's underclothes. You don't see stuff like that every day.

After he finished with the Outrageous Beauty, Moore's attention turned to the film "Fairy Tales Can Come True" and the erotic video.

Now he admits he is already impatient with video. "I'm tired of the video con," he admits. "I don't want people just to watch." Always in him there is the sense of trying to push back limits. "Whenever a new limit is crossed there is a release, which leads to comfortableness." The goal, he says over and over in his in-process bio is "the willingness to get involved with other people, to call the magic state from the people, to draw the audience into a state of unity."

Moore turns to his Atari and calls up a video game. He is instantly, completely absorbed. In the living room, two women members of



the family are deeply into their knitting machines. One is a designer, the other a manufacturer of knits and sportswear. It feels good in the house, a happy, productive scene.

I interrupt Moore to ask him one more question, what's his next move?

"So far," he writes out, "all my fantasies have come true. I've never really known what comes next, but teaching feels like something I have to do."

He must have registered my surprise at his answer because he continues to spell out words: "If Chris Burden can teach, so can I."

It is time to go. The women stop work for a minute to pick Frank up, and carry him over to his recliner. Away from his board, he is out of word contact. I leave the house exhausted and shaken. "Performance art," Moore wrote in his print-out autobio, "has no passive audience and is done in the real world."

Most of us are stars in our own little plays, and few of us any less so than Frank Moore. But almost none of us have had to work with materials as intractable as Frank Moore's. His ability to function as an artist at all is awesome. But his talent as an erotic creator is nearly inexplicable. But I bet somewhere, in some half-buried myth on Crete or Cyprus, there is a figure like Moore. A cthonic figure, all matted earth and fiery eyes, a laugh like a wild pig. Glee. Lust. Crippled free of any daily endeavors. Powerful as Spring and choking on vines. An ancient modern, handed down from urge to urge. "I don't ever," I thought to myself walking back to my car, "want to ever hear anyone—male or female—complain again that they can't get laid." Oddly comforted by the thought, I clicked on my engine, rolled back the roof to catch the late afternoon sunshine, and headed back across the bridge.

Photos: f-Stop Fitzgerald



