

# Body Beautiful

The woman in the blue wig and the dress cut full of revealing holes kissed every spectator who entered the basement of Franklin Furnace. "Wait for a midpriest to guide you to the world of dreams, to your own special place," she murmured, "and then to the cave of the shaman." I could hear the animal-like cries of the "shaman." Then, as a guide led a group of us through the low light and burning incense, I saw him up on the platform, in his "cave" hung with quilts, sheets, and strips of aluminum foil. He sat there naked in his wheelchair.

We were free to approach the shaman and ask any question, the guide told us after washing and kissing our feet. We were free to touch the shaman's body, but if we did so we were granting him the same permission. A naked man decorated in whorls of red body paint, his penis in green, danced by with a videocam. Musicians yelped and clicked and clucked to one side. Our guide, wearing a red gauze toga, poured us a drug (which tasted suspiciously like water) "to lower our inhibitions and fears." But no one had yet approached the shaman. Suddenly he lurched forward with a cry, flailing a stiff arm at one of the strips of foil hung along the front of his cave, knocking it down to see us better. And he howled.

Frank Moore, the self-described shaman, was born with cerebral palsy—99 per cent physically disabled, spastic, unable to speak. "I am lucky I am an exhibitionist in this body," he once wrote in an essay about his work. "I have a body that is ideal for a performance artist." With his neck (the only muscles he can con-



Linda Mac and Frank Moore: "I am lucky I am an exhibitionist in this body."

trol) and a pointer attached to a leather headband, he can type on a word processor or spell out messages on a letter board strapped to his wheelchair. "People project onto me certain mystical powers," the essay continued. "They are reacting to some symbol of the deformed medicine man." And if people treat him like a baby—since he is physically helpless—that just allows him to get away with unsocialized behavior, like howling, staring, or inappropriate touching. In performance, Moore takes advantage of his disadvantage, becoming an unlikely guide into the pleasures of the body, taking audiences where they would probably never go without the example of his vulnerability and trust.

Maybe because I spent the '60s where there were no '60s, Moore's piece felt to me like five real hours from the Summer of Love, complete with group grope. Nothing nostalgic, parodic, or ironic about it either. To the first daring soul who ventured up to Moore's cave, he tapped out the lines: "They are afraid. They don't know what they are missing." The '60s is such an embarrassing era to reenter after 20 years of cooling off. But as the evening wore on, the room began

to look like the photo of a Living Theater event—half-naked people walking through a mess.

Two of his gauze-clad helpers carried Moore out to a mat on the floor, and a woman read a text he'd composed about the "bony fingers" who cared for him. He lay there on his side, just as he'd been placed, his fingers twitching. "You may now explore Frank's body," the reader announced. One woman did. The story continued, as he and another performer acted out an apparent sexual fantasy about a new nurse (the "new prodger"). Total self-in-

dulgence, I thought. But I realized later that this helped prepare the audience to join Moore in what he calls "eroplay." The nurse scene had been so real—the nudity, the obvious affection, the simulated lovemaking—that the embarrassment level in the room rose palpably. Theoretically, we would soon reach our embarrassment threshold and be able to do anything.

Helpers carried Moore back to his cave, where we could now "play" with him, those of us "willing to push beyond where it's comfortable and safe." The woman narrating began to explain eroplay—"an intense physical playing or touching of oneself and others"—as perhaps eight or 10 people drifted into the cave. "Eroplay is innocent and childlike," read the woman with the blue wig, who turned out to be Moore's wife, Linda Mac. Eroplay would connect us with our own bodies and with other people. Eroplay was physical pleasure for its own sake, unconnected to sex or romance.

I didn't doubt that this was how Moore experienced it, but the next ritual certainly looked like a love-in. Over half the remaining audience of 30 chose to participate, seating themselves around Moore,

who'd been carried to the center of the basement. Linda Mac paired the people off in same-sex as well as opposite-sex couples, and then read them instructions she picked randomly from a bowl. "Rub your genitals, not for sexual reasons but for body comfort." "Hug one another." "Rub one another's bare breasts." Clothes began coming off, and someone behind me muttered to a friend, "Things like this used to happen in the Village all the time. It's sick." They were among those who left before the conclusion, when the helpers wrapped everyone in a giant circle of cellophane, ribbon, toilet paper, and aluminum foil.

We live in a culture that is increasingly disembodied. Where William Burroughs argues that someday we may be "reduced to a magnetic field." Where the artist Stelarc suspends himself from hooks through his skin, stating that the body is obsolete. Where the computer-generated



Max Headroom is a star. Where you don't need your own body to have a baby.

That Moore would be the one urging us to stay connected with our physical selves is both ironic and poetic, even if his performance didn't motivate me to explore the anonymous bodies at Franklin Furnace. After Moore's show, when he'd again been settled in his wheelchair with his pointer, I asked him how he'd decided he was a shaman. "A woman told me if I would stop hiding my body, it would be a tool," he spelled out methodically. The first thing I'd noticed about him close-up was the expression on his face. "You look happy," I said, and he tapped out, "Always." ■

A PALESD PERFORMER GETS PAID