

The Outrageous Beauty Pageant

Cripples, punks and lusty ladies make music and mayhem at San Francisco's Mabuhay Gardens

Article and Photos by Rollin' Jack

The raunchiest part of San Francisco's Broadway strip is only two or three blocks long, so a lot of sleaze has to pack in close. Bottomless joints, coed strippers, nude encounter parlors, adult book shops, belly dance restaurants, porno movie houses—they're all crowded in, sometimes one atop the other. Barkers at the doors of the sex palaces will do virtually anything to get you to come inside, but as Frank Moore was wheeled by



Frank Moore, the organizer of the show, converses with friend.

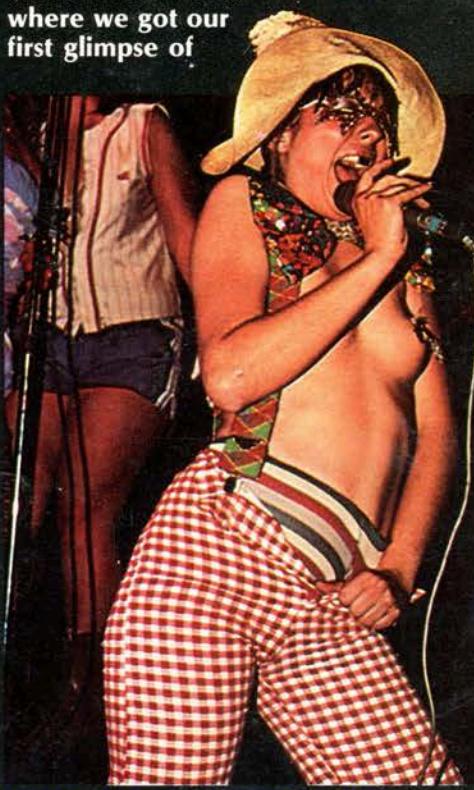
on the way from the Mabuhay Gardens, where he has just performed with his Berkeley-based Theater of Human Melting, no one invited him in.

The Mabuhay Gardens, called "The Mab" by its denizens, is down at the east



The Superheroes get it on.

affection by tossing cooked spaghetti and spraying foamy beer on its musicians. They further claim the Mab as punk space, liberating the toilets by necking in mixed couples among the deliberately shattered beer bottles and predictably gross graffiti. This night, early in the evening, a scattering of thrill-seekers had accumulated in the audience, but the mood was lighter, the milling performers exotic but warm, something compelling in the air. A knot of people, several wheelchairs among them, were assembled down front. That's where we got our first glimpse of



Superheroes lead loosens her lungs.

Frank Moore.

After the show, as we talked for hours in the tiny deli across the street, a woman behind the counter, consumed with curiosity, said, "Mister, may I ask you something?" Frank looked up at her. "Were you . . . in a . . . an accident or something?" "No," read Linda from Frank's board, "I have been like this since birth."

Frank is a quadriplegic, with



The chocolate pudding champ earns cheers and chuckles.

Bras and "blood" in a big musical production number.



PARTNER correspondent, Rollin' Jack, works fingers to the bone.



The Sexual Robots make Frank Moore face the muff music.



Peter (far right) is "treated" by his dominatrix nurse.

only a minor ability to control his arms and legs. He is mute, but can produce sounds, laugh, and display clear emotions. Wheelchair-bound, he must be carried from place to place when he's not in his chair. Saliva drips from his mouth, clotting in his beard or falling onto the wooden alphabet board in front of him. This board is mounted like a tray on the arms of Frank's chair, and it is his voice. His name, Frank Moore, runs across the top (useful if someone says, "Hi. What's your name?") and a large group of often-used words like "yes," "no," "he," "with," "and," and so forth, are lettered down both sides; at the center is an alphabet and below it the ten Arabic numerals.

Frank wears a head harness, made of leather and decorated with hand-tooling, which goes across his brow, over the top of his head, and under his chin, where it fastens. Where the straps cross at the center of his forehead, there is a leather socket, in which is mounted a length of dowling that looks like half a pool cue, with a rubber tip at its end. Frank indicates words and

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Flash shots from "Tracy with Classic Greek Statues" skit.



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letters with his pointer, and whoever talks with him must read the words and letters aloud, so that Frank will know you've understood. Much of the time we talked to him he worked with Linda, who knows him well and anticipates much of what he intends to say, sometimes needing only a few words or even a few letters. It quickly becomes very easy to talk to Frank, and I smiled to realize that very often he was patiently waiting for me to catch up to him.

The Outrageous Beauty Pageant is narrated by a blonde-wigged woman who does her own version of Gilda Radner playing Rosanne Rosannadonna. She particularly likes to discuss movies and movie star scandals. With her as backup is a stocky mustached man wearing a hat, a short-sleeved shirt, and a pair of army drill Bermuda shorts, who interjects a few words.

When an audience member asked her occupation, she answered, truthfully as it turned out, "construction worker," and went on to describe the "itty bitty pieces of fiberglass that get under your nails when you put in the insulation . . . you know . . ."

Frank is on stage with two beautiful women, performing Sexual Robots. The Pageant's skits are four or five minutes long, strung together like beads on a string. The images of Frank, slumped in a metal lounge chair, covered and uncovered by the gyrating women over him, are frozen by the flashing strobe illumination into tiny jewels set within this bead. The music is loud and wailing. These robots, says the narrator, are designed to fulfill any sexual fantasy. In the flashes, we see Frank's torso undulating wildly; the women are moving constantly, sitting

on his face, plunging a head between his legs, rubbing back and forth over his body.

From the East Coast, Frank moved to Sante Fe, New Mexico, where he spent a year just being a hippie, then to San Bernardino, California, and finally to the San Francisco Bay area, seeking compatible friends and co-workers, attracting them to him one by one. He tried the streets, talking to anyone who would pause and make the effort. He met Linda, a fugitive from the growth movement, who found working in a travel agency a more basic way to enlightenment. Frank wheeled in one day and said, "You'd be great in this play I'm doing." She was.

Steve Hoffman kneels on a low raised platform down center stage, a three-woman backup singing group behind him. He imitates John Belushi imitating Joe Cocker (imitating Steve Hoffman to complete the circle.) Nature has prepared him for the role. His hands flair awkwardly, his body twists, his facial muscles contort, his legs won't support him. He bellows "A Little Help From My Friends," his words garbled almost beyond understanding. Steve captures the spirit of Cocker much more eloquently than Belushi, twitching, staring vacantly at the audience, and periodically swigging from a bottle, dribbling it all over himself. It's an excruciatingly funny bit, and gets explosions of laughter from the crowd.

Frank is now based in Berkeley, and the group of people around him has grown to about thirty, most of whom have performed in the show at one time or another. They are divided between group households and a few single-family living units. Most of them are paired—Frank's wife, Debbie, is not there this evening—and do not have sex outside their pairs, but they are freely erotic within the group. In neither their shows nor the private workshop they do together every week is there any actual sex or violence, though part of their group technique is to allow one person the center of a circle and the time to demand anything he wants of the rest of the participants.

In her flat Rosanne delivery, the narrator, Diane, announces, "Tracy with Classic Greek Statues." The lights go off, and in the dimness figures move. The lights go on, and there is tall, voluptuous Tracy draped nakedly a la a classic Venus. She holds the pose in the bright light, changes to another when they go off. She tries not to laugh.

What do you want to get across in theater? I asked Frank. "Not to be serious and not get too polished," he said. "We've discovered the freedom to be crazy and wacky." Are you making a political statement? "No." A pause. "There is, but if we stated it, it would be counter to what we're doing. We're

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sneaky about getting our statement across. We can people into closeness." What's your basic thing? "Personal closeness and the responsibility that comes from that."

Dottie roams the audience, naked under a dayglow shift, her face twisted in utter madness, uttering delighted little gurgles and great whooping bellows of joy and appreciation. Over chairs and tables she scrambles, looking as though she's prepared to sit on the first face that shows itself. The audience quails away from her. A follow-spot tries to keep up with her. "She's got real stage presence," comes the nasal Rosanna voice from the darkened stage, "Real natural grace." Before Dottie is able to really get into it with some unfortunate beer drinker, she is removed forcibly by a white-uniformed female attendant.

Frank Moore and his group are putting together their own theater in Berkeley. When it's done, they'll be able to perform theatrically without many of the cabaret restrictions placed on them at the Mab because alcohol is sold there. "Dirk keeps telling us to wear pasties," says Nina in the restaurant, "but they always fall off." What are Frank's goals in his new theater? "I have no goals," he said, "but I would like to get people to be more colorful and playful."

Peter is in a wheelchair, his arms and legs atrophied. He speaks distinctly. Left alone with him, his uniformed nurse abruptly switches personalities, strips to her black dominatrix underwear, and proceeds to torture Peter, dancing about him, growling evilly at him, spraying him with body wastes and with blood. Peter begs for mercy, but the cruel nurse will show him none.

In the group, everyone has the freedom to be "wacky and erotic." They use no drugs or alcohol. "If you want to be close to someone, you express it through sex. If you have sex with someone you're not close to, it can confuse the nature of the relationship. So why not keep having sex until you get to such a level of closeness that you become free to be physical and erotic with the entire group?"

It is late in the show. The audience has filled with New Wave uglies who are anxious for the deafening music to begin and can't figure out what the fuck is happening on the stage. There is an occasional catcall, and a rain of popcorn is falling steadily, but the Outrageous Beauty Pageant has gotten them in its clutches, as it has gotten me.

After the acts—the female Elvis Presley imitator, the fifties rock star dressed in black who sings "Leader of

the Pack" as groupies howl at him from the audience, several musical numbers by the Superheros, including their best, "Here Comes Success,"—comes the finale. A table with white linen is brought onstage; on it is placed a large bowl of warm noodles and another of what proved to be chocolate pudding. "Oh, oh!" thought I, and moved my chair back a little. We had been told "no violence," but not "no chocolate pudding." Seated at the table in a wheelchair, dressed in a bathrobe, a pipe stuck between his teeth, is a man with a fixed smile on his face. For some time he sits, totally motionless, then abruptly hurls himself forward into the table, knocking it, its contents, and himself to the floor. He writhes about in the noodles and pudding, trying to get a bit to eat in the process, and working himself out of his robe to be revealed nude except for jockey shorts. The lights dim on his total ruination, he is carried off stage, and the stage crew begins an extensive clean-up, broken glass and all, in preparation for the first punk musical group. Part of what this theater is about, I thought, is cleaning up your act.

I found that I had indeed been conned by Frank and his Outrageous Beauties into seeing the beauty of these disabled people, their capacity for sensuality and emotion, their physical capacities which are masked by the public's preconceived notions about life in a wheelchair. Often, there is more function than appears at first sight. They are reaching out for feeling and response, just as we all are. Laughs and applause are an affirmation of our mutual humanity and a means of coming closer. I should note again that I was conned. Only a small portion of the cast was disabled, and the subject of their show was not that at all. As theater their acts are rough and unpolished, but as human drama they do go beyond the growth movement in their direct impact on the observer. As cabaret, the apparent motive forces of sex and outrageous costume carry the performance past the Mab's audience, one that has come to take a perverse pleasure in appearing ugly. Frank and his Theater of Human Melting give a first appearance of ugliness but, in the end, rise above all apparent physical setting as the Outrageous Beauties they really are.