

EAST BAY EXPRESS

City Solo Finds the Lighter Side of Lesbianism:

Four artists discover that joy and social-consciousness can exist in the same room

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East Bay Express | Arts & Culture | Culture Spy

June 16, 2010

"I don't like performing in front of lesbians," said Oakland comic Janine Brito, who identifies herself as one. "There's too much social consciousness for joy to exist."

Brito's aversion to "social consciousness" became a running joke in her act after a particularly traumatic show last fall. She'd been consigned to perform for a majority-queer, majority-female audience at a San Jose art gallery. In a previous generation, it would have been the Birkenstock crowd. Everyone sat on the floor, amid sculptures and installations. Whoever hosted that night kept the house lights on. "The whole time I'm driving down there, I'm like, 'What can I do, I need to get these women on my side right away?' So I wrote some slam poetry, because lesbians fucking love slam poetry." Brito opened with a poem, then did an absurdist bit called "Panda Rape," which got a lot of bemused stares. She said the set flopped.

"We don't get the NASCAR lesbians here," said Brito's friend Julia Jackson, who worked a lot of gay clubs over the course of her own comedy career. "You know that joke, 'How many lesbians does it take to screw in a light bulb?' One. And that's not funny!"

Jackson and Brito have since decided to embrace — or grudgingly accept — what they describe as the cold, earnest consideration of lesbian audiences in the Bay Area. That's partly a matter of pragmatism. Comedy is a tough business, after all, and it's always nice to have a niche market to fall back on. But it was also a matter of negotiating individuality with group membership, which can sometimes be a precarious balance, Brito said. If you go onstage as a lesbian comic, people expect Ellen or Paula Poundstone, she explained. But that's not always what they're gonna get. "Once you're good enough, you have your thing figured out, and other people know you, then your own people claim you again," Brito said.



Co-producers and curators
Nicole Maxali (left) and Thao P.
Nguyen (right)

What began as aversion became inspiration. This week, Brito and Jackson join Martha Rynberg and Thao P. Nguyen for an all-lesbian solo performance showcase, held at San Francisco's Off-Market Theater. Set to coincide with SF Pride, the event features material that's a little more probing and serious than the bits that Jackson and Brito use in their comedy sets. Jackson's piece, "I Didn't Sign Up for This!" documents the long and onerous process of adopting a child with her same-sex partner. Brito remembers early adolescence in "My Diary, No Grown-Ups Allowed!" Nguyen discusses the difficulty of reconciling her gay and Vietnamese identity in "I Am Sooooo Gay." Rynberg reenacts a bizarre fantasy about liposuction, disfigurement, and femininity in "Lady Parts." The various themes that animate these performances all have something to do with lesbian identity.

The showcase is part of City Solo, an event that Nguyen produces on the first three Sundays of the month, with a rotating lineup of comics and actors. Many of them came up through the solo performance workshop at San Francisco's Shelton Theater, and went on to develop their own shows. Some are working

Show Info: City Solo happens Sunday, June 20, at the Off-Market Theater (965 Mission St., San Francisco), 7 p.m. \$15-\$20. CafeArts.com/OffMarket

comics. Others migrated from the spoken-word or theater scene. A couple of them write and act professionally, but the vast majority have day jobs. Nguyen usually comes up with a theme or concept to glue everyone together, but allows each performer to approach it with her own personality. The format lends itself to a lot of personal narrative. That's dicey, Nguyen said. Solo performance isn't the same as regular theater. Its production values are lean and it's heavy on first-person voice.

Left unchecked, it can veer perilously close to becoming a therapy session onstage. Where comedy is all about self-deprecation, solo performance easily devolves into solipsism. And that only gets worse when you throw in the identity or sexuality angle. "I've seen other shows that are more open-mickey," Nguyen said. "But this one is vetted. I'm anal retentive."

Jackson concurred: "You better have worked this shit out to the point where you have a little distance on it."

For Jackson, it wasn't easy to find that happy medium ground between humor and identity-affirmation. She got into comedy sixteen years ago after finishing law school and moving to San Francisco. At that time she worked a mix of straight and gay rooms, and got accustomed to being the only female on the lineup. It paid to be edgy, and it definitely paid to be blue. "Out of fifteen comics, thirteen are male, and nine of them are 'my dick, my dick, my dick, my dick,'" Jackson recalled. "But I'm very masculine, I talk fast, and I can go a little dirty — so I fit in." Jackson says she actually got fired from a Monday night showcase at Josie's Juice Joint & Cabaret. "In my little repertoire of ten jokes there were a few about being from Wisconsin ... including one about being fat, and one about eating cheese," she said. The booker — "an old crusty fart" — apparently took offense to the fat jokes. Not to mention that the booker was eating a cheese sandwich the day Jackson waltzed in to ask about her next booking. "She thrust it in my face to make her point," Jackson said. "And then I went into the alley and cried."

How Jackson and Brito wound up in City Solo's most self-affirming lesbian showcase is a little perplexing. Jackson said she got seduced by the solo performance format a few years ago, after watching Dan Rothenberg's show "Regretrosexual" (in which the playwright talks about being a failed homosexual). In 2006 she wrote a ten-minute piece about shopping for wedding dresses with her mother, and tried it out at Shelton Theater. "This whole thing about being affirmed by my mother, being pretty in a dress — like, all that complicated shit — can come out easier in solo performance," she said. "In stand-up, I do that as a bit, and it's like, 'boom, boom, boom, boom, boom.' Five jokes in a minute." Twenty-six-year-old Brito can go serious, too, but she still has apprehension about playing to a lesbian crowd. She came up in the alt-hipster school of comedy, and doesn't like getting crowbarred into any single identity category. She's not a torch-bearer. She says that of the four pieces at Sunday's City Solo, hers is probably the least gay.

All the same, Brito has generated a lot of adoration in the LGBT scene. Even after that excruciating San Jose art gallery show. Especially after that San Jose art gallery show. Apparently, it wasn't nearly as bad as Brito initially thought. "Since then, they've been the most supportive people ever," she said. "They'll drive out to see me."