Running Amok

Rabble-rousing entertainment is coming to a city park near you  
By Raven Snook

Jennifer Miller, the founder of Circus Amok—a politically charged, multicultural outdoor extravaganza—is someone to be reckoned with. She is quick-witted and charismatic, and when she speaks about her troupe, the face beneath her dark, shiny whiskers glows.

Jennifer Miller, the founder of Circus Amok—a politically charged, multicultural outdoor extravaganza—is someone to be reckoned with. She is quick-witted and charismatic, and when she speaks about her troupe, the face beneath her dark, shiny whiskers glows. Miller is a real-life bearded lady who also juggles knives, turns cartwheels, acts as ringmaster and directs this mind-boggling circus, which will celebrate its 15th anniversary in September with a month of performances in parks around the city.

Circus Amok has an agenda: to entertain while it skewers the status quo. Every season, Miller and her gang dissect a controversial theme. Last year, it was homeland security. This year, it's education. But the seriousness of the issues doesn't detract from the fun. "People just dig it," Miller says. "We try to hit on every level, so the kids are watching vaudeville and clowning, and the parents are getting the double entendres and the puns. It's a big, fabulous extravaganza—is someone to be reckoned with."

The first Circus Amok performance took place indoors, at P.S. 122 in the East Village, back in 1989. But after five years of playing to what Miller had dubbed "the art ghetto," she decided to take the show to city parks. "It was a huge change," she recalls. "Not only were we starting to play for more kids and families, but also for people of many colors, ethnicities, ages and classes."

Circus Amok's array of outrageous acts includes drag-king jugglers, tattooed tumblers and queer clowns, as well as a raucous six-piece band that plays everything from punk to and hip-hop to show tunes. Last year's showstopper was "The Ballad of Georgio Bushwack," a parody of Eminem's "I'm Shady" that sharply criticized Dubya, one of Circus Amok's favorite targets.

Miller is enthusiastic about her choice of education as this season's theme. "It's about the kids' world and their rights," she says. "Education is Mayor Bloomberg's calling card, which is why we can take him to task on it." The show will spoof myriad topics, such as third-grade testing, teaching to the tests, the dissolution of community school boards and the Board of Education, and imposed curricula. "But we'll do it through the magic of the circus," Miller adds, and shifts effortlessly into ringmaster mode: "Testing will be put to the test in the run-up to Election Day.

And of course, Miller's very appearance—her thick beard juxtaposed with her female form—is innately political. She challenges ideas of masculine and feminine, gay and straight by just walking down the street. But even kids respond positively. "One of our most amazing experiences is going out and finding that people aren't nearly as homophobic as the mass media leads us to believe," says Miller. "Circus Amok is set in a queer world, but it's a queer world that welcomes everyone." Which is why Miller is always sure to greet the audience by exclaiming, "Ladies and gentleman, boys and girls, and the rest of us...."

For a performance schedule, visit www.circusamok.org.

September 21, 2004