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PHOTOS

BLOGS

Event Reviews

Eating Glass and Wearing a Beard: Learning From Jennifer Miller

by [Jaime Hough](#)

Tuesday night, Oct. 25, Spurlock Museum hosted the talk "How to Wear a Beard: Reflections on a Life in the Sideshow, the Circus, and the Academy" as part of the Queer Performance Series.

True to its title, the talk covered a range of subjects from the backstage life of a sideshow performer to a brief history of sideshows in the United States.

The star of the talk was Jennifer Miller, the founder of New York City's Circus Amok, professor of performance at Pratt University, playwright, activist and all around inspiration.

Miller started her performance and discussion with a recitation of Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl." She incorporated modern dance and a handheld industrial light into her performance of the poem for dramatic effect. Pausing momentarily, she approached the first row of audience members, unscrewed the hot light bulb from its socket and asked, "Is this real?" The audience members of the first row, including yours truly, held and observed the light bulb making sure that it was, in every way, ordinary and very real. Next, Miller put the light bulb in a plastic bag and broke it with a hammer. She looked for a moment at the broken light bulb as if the sight took her by surprise and casually commented, "That's real."

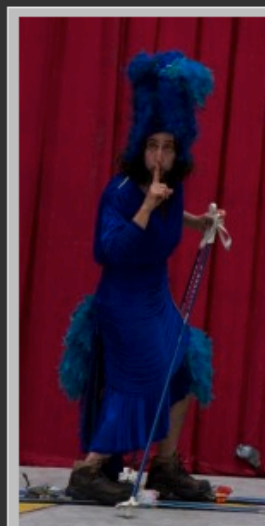
She went on with the recital of the poem while casually eating real pieces of glass from the real, and really broken, light bulb.

As mentioned above, Miller wears many hats. However, in my humble opinion, Miller is, most of all, a philosopher. Her performance with the light bulb was part show business common sense, making sure the audience couldn't look away. It was also a microcosm of the themes running throughout her talk.

When Miller talked about what it was like to be a bearded woman both in and out of the Coney Island sideshow, she was talking about reality. How she, as a woman with a beard (one of many worldwide — the phenomena is by no means as uncommon as we think) experienced daily life and reality differently. How many of us know what it's

like to be stared at constantly as we walk down the street? How many of us, especially as women, have the courage to say "no" when ideals of beauty or normality dictate that we change our appearance?

Choosing to let her beard grow was a breaking with societal norms and familial expectation in every way as real, but perhaps not as tangible, as the breaking of the light bulb. Miller's talk about what it is and has been like to work and live as a bearded lady was full of hard earned reflections about incorporating a new view and experience of reality and flourishing. A process just as dangerous and just as captivating as eating glass.



Picture of Jennifer Miller, bearded woman, performing with the circus troupe she founded Circus Amok. Image from circusamok.org.