
Bearded lady combats gender stigmas

Performer and activist spreads message of social justice at Fleming

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The Fleming Museum, along with on campus organizations Free2Be, the LGBTQA Center and the Women and Gender Studies Program hosted founder and Artistic Director of Circus Amok, Jennifer Miller on Friday, March 25.

The show, titled "How to Wear a Beard: Politics, Art, Sideshows, Circuses and Life in General" discussed Miller's everyday lifestyle of being a female and choosing to live with a beard.

The show explored how her decision to live with facial hair played a role in enhancing her work as a political performer. Using humor, Miller explored life working in a sideshow, ultimately comparing it to the exploration of gender and other social justice issues currently plaguing our society.

Miller did not want to succumb to the social beautification process, thus deciding to defy gender norms by growing a beard.

"I'm a child of the '60s. I don't take hormones. It could be that I was just slow and didn't discern between not shaving my legs and not shaving my face," Miller said.

Incorporating her circus acts into the lecture, Miller performed acts like eating glass and



JAMIE LENT - Vermont Cynic

Jennifer Miller, artistic director of Circus Amok, speaks to students at the "How to Wear a Beard" event in the Fleming Museum on Friday March 25.

machete juggling.

Circus Amok, which she founded in 1989, has been operating, free of charge, in New York City parks since 1994, Miller said.

Miller and the rest of the circus go into public parks roughly 20 times every September, putting on shows that surround themes regarding social justice issues, like the defining of gender roles.

Starting her career after witnessing a sideshow in Coney Island, Miller had an appreciation for the various acts and types of people, she said. The unique qualities that the characters attributed to the show allowed a place for individuals who normally might not blend with societal norms and expectations to really be seen.

Portraying the harsh stigmas that surround people deemed "different" by society, Miller discussed the history of individuals who were discriminated against based on physical appearances.

"These 'problem' bodies that appeared in the sideshow empowered those who were targeted, mentally, emotionally and physically," she said.

Having performed hundreds of shows over the span of her circus career, Miller uses her past experiences and understanding of the social justice issues that plague our society to entertain audiences, while opening their eyes to the issues as well.

"Because I deal with body image so much, and having people look at me, I've realized everyone feels not normal and not centered," she said.

Now working in academia, Miller fully embraces her unique physical attributes.

"When I was first introduced as the bearded lady, there was a sense of relief and I could grow through that," Miller said.

The show ended with positive comments from audience members.

"You are a wonderful woman," a audience member said.