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## Circus Minimus

### Jennifer Miller Wows 'Em in the Nabes

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Drawn by the oom-pah-pahs and the kindergarten colors, people drift into St. Mary's Park in the South Bronx from the projects or from East 149th. Backstage—a patch of park behind the red curtain—seven Circus Amok troupers sit in front of open suitcases, applying makeup. Scattered around them on the lawn are all the accoutrements of low-rent razzle-dazzle: stilts and Indian clubs, giant giraffe and blue-jay heads, a cardboard ambulance, a cardboard Volkswagen attached to a hunk of road, a chute and a ladder, and costumes in various shades of spangly, fringy, garish, and clownish. The South Bronx may not get many circuses, but this one begins like most Amok shows, with kids sitting right up next to the lime green-and-purple circus ring, watching the performers warm up and asking, "Is that a man or a lady?"

Jennifer Miller, founder and director of Circus Amok, sees it as part of the project, this inevitable talk with the kids: "Yes, I'm a woman with a beard." And when they ask her why she has one, she tells them, "It grows there."

This is a circus with a message, though it's only incidentally about facial hair. Amok gave free shows throughout the month of June in parks like Van Cortlandt, Marcus Garvey, and Prospect, asking that question of the hour: "How's your quality of life?" And defying the notion that circuses are "pure" entertainment with elephant acts instead of politics. Here in the South Bronx? Not a pachyderm in sight.

But the Amoksters do fool ya. They swagger out on stilts and dance in striped pants as circus acrobats have done for centuries. Then one of the roustabouts, in an outfit that is half-dress, half-business suit, tackles the center stiltwalker—Miller—pulling off her mufti. Under the stripes, she's in a long dark-green gown, a costume for the classic bearded lady, yelling about Yankee Stadium and traffic and the high incidence of asthma in the Bronx. "Crosstown traffic's more important to relieve, even though you can hardly breathe." This is the charivari, the setup act. A man dressed in bra, girdle, and heels bursts through the curtain. Da Mayor? He's holding up a big sign: "Behave!" The other troupers tumble and handstand around him. It's chaos and cacophony—the old Times Square, I guess. Someone just scooted by in Mouseka-ears.

As a girl, Miller was never much interested in circuses, but she did have this romantic attachment to street performance. She taught herself juggling in high school—from a book.

Working a sideshow was never something she planned on either, but that's her paying gig for the rest of the summer, at Sideshows by the Seashore, 1208 Surf Avenue, in Coney Island. One day seven years ago, she was on the boardwalk, peering into the joint, when impresario Dick Zigun walked out and boldly asked, "We're looking for a bearded lady here. Interested?"

"I don't remember what I said," Miller reflects, "but it was sort of a preposterous idea. Yet at the same

time a completely appropriate idea, and I really wanted to check it out. Get to the roots of the iconography that I was constantly being viewed in relation to."

Miller has had a full beard since her late twenties, and most of the pieces written about her focus on the facial hair. Miller says she doesn't really mind, but "it's hard for me to keep having fresh thinking about it." The sideshow's appeal has always been about giving people a look at the forbidden. Yet, Miller's managed to turn her act as "Zenobia" into a political statement. Zenobia is "a woman with a beard, not a bearded lady." Because she's one of many women with facial hair, she just chose to avoid waxing, shaving, plucking, and electrolysis. Miller figures she's done this "comedy-lecture with knife juggling" many hundred times, at the rate of 11 or 12 shows a day. She also does a Houdini-style escape act, and the "step-right-up" routine outside between shows.

For her the sideshow is just a job, but she likes performing for people who never see theater. She's also participated in that latter-day freak fest, *The Jerry Springer Show*, because, among other things, it allowed her to meet Priscilla the Monkey Girl, last of the well-known bearded ladies.

"The sideshow is a folkloric form. I have loved studying that and getting to know it in the craft sense, from the inside. But it has an awful history. In terms of cultural influence, it's in this category with minstrel shows and Wild West shows and the Venus Hottentot. It misinforms. It says these people aren't human. Or these people are pathetic. That women with beards are freaks and have to be in the sideshow, not the main show."

Miller thinks the Zigun sideshow has a sort of camp sensibility, but no one else in the show is political. "My being there sets up a dialectic," she says. Otherwise it's just "guys eating fire and skinny girls going into the blade box."

Miller performed in other circuses before starting her own, and those outfits were not exactly Ringling Brothers. They fell under the big tent of "alternative," yet she found them "very resistant to, first of all, any sort of queer outness. They had this idea that if you're going to bring work to people in parks, you have to bring work they can 'handle.'"

In Circus Amok, the form is queer, while the content includes police brutality, pedestrian barriers, bricks falling from school facades, the malling of Manhattan, and the jaywalking laws. Amok gives the old tried-and-true circus bits some edge: A hapless New Yorker is run over by the mayor in a car followed by the press (clocking his speed), the ambulance pulls up, and—uh-oh—all the doctors and nurses are clowns! A cop gives the injured party a ticket, and he's a clown!

The South Bronx crowd not only handled it, but loved it. Miller says Amok got negative reactions at only one show this year, Pier 25 in Tribeca, their "most moneyed audience." People there complained that the bits about police brutality and schools falling down scared the kids. "For these Pier 25 people, we were bringing this scary imagery into their protected world," said Miller. "For the rest of New York City, we were talking about things that happen in their lives."

Then, when they performed in Williamsburg, the Hasidim walked out. They'd come early and asked Miller how much skin was going to be seen. "I thought they were just asking about women," she says. She forgot to tell them about the man in a bra and girdle. When he entered, they exited. Miller was disappointed, because she wanted to perform for the Hasidim. They're her neighbors. Amok may return and do a "properly clothed show" just for them.

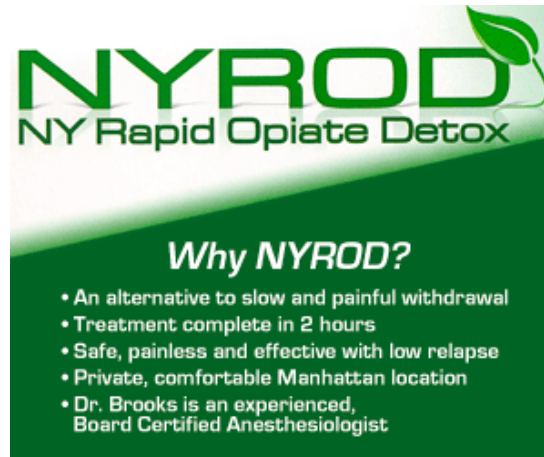
Still, Miller judges the season a big success. For one thing, in this, their fourth year of outdoor

performances, they had a lot fewer people yelling, "Faggot!"

In the middle of the Circus Amok show, performer Scott Heron appears in bowler hat and plaid jacket with slacks to walk the tightrope. It's just inches above the mat but he makes up for that in degree of difficulty, doing a striptease to reveal the prom dress underneath. Jumping down, he adds silver heels and walks the rope again, a feat never duplicated by the Flying Wallendas.

After the show, one man remarks on how great it was for the kids, who were beginning to somersault and cartwheel toward home.

"Not only the kids," says a woman. "They have a message." She had particularly noticed the cross-dressing. It was the thing she most liked, and she knew just what it meant: "It doesn't matter who you are, how you dress, whatever you do, we all have these other problems, and they're real."



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