

# Amokamuck



Scott Heron walks the plank at Asser Levy Park

## By William Harris

Jennifer Miller has been hanging around the Downtown dance scene since 1982, both as a performer and as a techie. If most people don't know Miller personally—and, therefore, haven't experienced her wit or intelligence firsthand—they probably know her by sight. She's the slight woman with the basset hound eyes and the prominent facial hair. It's a beard, actually, an unapologetic political statement about her identity as a radical feminist lesbian.

The 35-year-old Miller also happens to be the founder and artistic director of Circus Amok, a 15-member troupe of scruffy acrobats, jugglers, clowns, dancers, roustabouts and musicians. Starting Friday, June 2, and every weekend through June 18, Circus Amok will give performances in different parks through-

out Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. There are 11 performances in total; all are free and each lasts just 55 minutes.

Circus Amok blends traditional circus acts, performed with a goofy, sometimes campy edge, and urgent social commentary. The new show is about life in New York City, particularly the impact of proposed budget cuts. Ultimately, the work is both silly and smart. In that way, Circus Amok is very reminiscent of the legendary San Francisco Mime Troupe.

"I'm obsessed by wanting theater to be more active and activating and political and free and outdoors," says Miller.

"I also like the visual feeling of the circus and the romanticism of the circus family. Who is this ensemble that comes to town and then leaves? I love the combination of grandeur and grime that one sees in traditional circus—all those middle-

aged women with fishnet stockings, sequined outfits, imperfect bodies, and stiletto heels.

"One of the things I like about the form," she continues, "is that it functions in acts. You have one thing, then another, so you can juxtapose a lot of diverse elements, ideas, and tempos in one show. I also love the performance style, the whole 'fessing up to the performance as presentational. 'We're here, we know we're here, we're big, we want to show off, we want to communicate with you, and we want you to whoop and holler.' As opposed to the dance tradition I grew up in, which said: 'I'm here and sensing my molecules move, and I hope you find it interesting and I'm working and there's got to be some art in here as well.'"

Miller created Circus Amok back in 1989, in part, she admits, as a response to the insularity of the Downtown performance scene. She was frustrated to be always performing for the same small circle of East Village theater/dance devotees, and dismayed by the need to constantly sell herself as a marketable commodity to producers. Besides, ever since high school, when she began juggling, she has been passionate about the circus form—its history, its sense of wonder, and its weirdness.

"Circus is a popular entertainment form," she says. "I want to entertain, but not as a cathartic experience or a numbing of the mind. We bring up a lot of sad stuff, but the fact that we're making a circus full of energy is, to me, indicative of a certain amount of hope. Energy is a manifestation of resistance."

Does Miller's beard create problems for audiences? "People expect freaks in the circus," she shrugs. ■