Amokamuck

By William Harris

Jennifer Miller has been hanging around the Downtown dance scene since 1982, both as a performer and as a critic. 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 basket-bound eyes and the prominent facial hair. It’s a beard, actually, an unapologetic political statement about her identity as a radical femi-nist lesbian.

The 35-year-old Miller also happens to be the founder and artistic director of Circus Amok, a 12-member troupe of scruffy acrobats, jugglers, clowns, dancers, roundabouts and musicians. Starting Friday, June 2, and every weekend through June 18, Circus Amok will give performances in different parks throughout 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 watching theaters to be more active and activating and political and free outdoors,” Miller said.

“I also like the visual feeling of the circus and the romanticism of the circus family. Who’s this en-semble that comes to town and then leaves? I love the combination of grandeur and grit that one sees in traditional circuses—all those middle-aged women with fishnet stockings, sequined outfits, imperfect bodies, and dirty hair.”

“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, within one performance. In one show I also love the performance style, the whole ‘flying up to the performance as preparatory.” As opposed to the dance traditions I grew up in, which said, ‘Here I am and sensing my environment move, and I hope you find it interesting and I’m working and there’s got to be some art in the way I’m walking.’”

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 at being 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 was always involved, she had been passionate about the circus form—it’s history, its sense of wonder, and its weirdness.

“Circus is a popular entertain-ment form,” she says. “I want to use it as not as something that’s a cheap consumer experience or something involving 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 resis-tance.”

Does Miller’s beard create prob-lems for the audience? “People expect freaks in the circus,” she shrugs. clear rhythmic signals and requires the dancers to engage the floor. One of the pitfalls of the urge toward intimacy is that it easily devolves into utter bittersweetness, with the performer sealed in a trance of his own making, exploring some private inspiration. Treal Harrell, summoning audiences to various downtown sites at 6:30 in the morn-ing, bewildered me by standing practically still in a dramatic hunched dress, his head shaved, slowly shifting his weight from one foot to the other, slowly turning his upper body from side to side. He might have been dancing, praying for some kind of divine guidance; from the formalism of his feet emanated the plaintive songs of Sade and Tracy Chapman. Why this display required a down performance was unclear, as was Harrell’s intention or motivation, but he does exude a certain ethereal beauty. At Context Hall on Avenue A, under the rubric of New Material, an all-male ensemble executed movements with no apparent significance to music you could barely hear, hermetically sealed in a dark scattered around, remained perpetually out of reach. Meg Wolfe clutched to her chest the body of an evening gown in an evocative sense of slipping; the tension was devastating and, our relief when she finally let it drop from sight, was mysteriously equivocal but possessed of real physical excitement was Amy Coe’s sextet (or was it fragments from a number of works?) Dataing, My Angel... and Lamb. To music by Greg Bullock that stormed in and out, the dancers coughed and sneezed, suffocated, nuzzled; a powerful interlude had Roel Hammerslag wading crotch-deep through a sea of wriggling bodies, sliding against her neck, her butt firmly planted in a rolling swivel chair. I didn’t get it, but I’ll take another look.