

ENTERTAINMENT

MOOSEMAN SPEAKS

By Carla Lam

Saturday I had my first encounter with Performance Art via Barry Nichols - a gay, Halifax based artist - originally from Nicholsville Newfoundland. And what a memorable experience it was.

At BlackBox Theatre (STU) Nichols impeccably presented *Happy Birthday Humanity* (a relatively new piece) and *Mooseman's Boreal Bog of Spent Xmas Trees* (Nichol's first performance Art endeavor.) These works in addition to a number of other performance pieces combined with a respectable record of installation and video art, make up his impressive repertoire.

Mooseman, Nichol's primary stage persona, is the result of a boy colliding with a moose in a highway accident and, as Peter Gard aptly summed in his May 92 article in *The Newfoundland Herald*, "...waking up to find 20 kilograms of cumbersome antlers on his head." This experience the performer "...likens to discovering you're gay."

Throughout the evening, clad in children's pajamas, a blinking jock strap or a Newfoundland tartan kilt with a wide rack of antlers, Nichols effectively manipulated scattered props—completely obscure individually—and roped them meaningfully together with the silk of his ambiguous words and graceful manner. The amazing fact is that despite the obvious ridiculousness of his dress, Nichols succeeds so utterly in commanding a profound and potent response—that touches to the very soul.

BARRY NICHOLS The MAN BENEATH The ANTLERS...

On Performance art ...

"Quite a lot of performance art... um... was more direct about some kind of experience that was happening. I keep thinking of this one that happened in New York years ago—of a guy who brought in a cockroach in a bag and just let it go and then chased it around with a can of Black Flag—until he finally killed the thing. (Pause) My work is more theatrical than that."

"There's a lot of play with it, yeah. Um—the first piece *Happy Birthday Humanity* or the piece *Happy Birthday Humanity*—is still being developed. It's fairly new and it's not developed—not finished yet. So part of how you develop it is performing it because it's only under those circumstances you actually get to see it's ah... dimensions, it's limitations and weaknesses...and things."

His Art ...

"I use persona ... in a sense... I call them persona, it's like character. I don't call them characters cause they're actually just parts of myself, ... But it's amplified when you're in the position of being in front of other people."

"It's not about acting so much, although there's elements in it."

Difference between Performance Art & Theatre ...

"I think that's - probably how I see my work as being different from theatre—why it's performance art and not theatre (although it's scripted)—because it's me ... although sometimes it's just a part of me that's amplified."

"... because I write, I need to—I gotta do something with it. And my writing is not structured for publishing so much as—it's a mixture of poetry, and prose, and all kinds of stuff."

"I always feel it needs to be performed or spoken. It needs to be spoken. So I sometimes think I'm doing poetry readings ... But a friend of mine describes it as "decorated storytelling." (pause) They're all part descriptions of what it is."

On Aggressive performance (does not apply to his own) ...

The *Boreal Bog* show was written out of extreme anger—and a lot of the material in the first, early drafts for it were extremely angry, and the more time I spent with that it became like "this is my anger, and there's no reason to—what's your point in sharing this with other people.... like.. why treat them the same way you've been treated or feel. You're just extending something that you don't really like in the first place—so it became more energy then—of rewriting the material and trying to structure it in a format that made it more presentable, more engaging, more

enjoyable...to share with other people. So they'll see my own pain and anger in the piece, but from a different perspective—it's not dumping it on them. It's just acknowledging that it exists, and structuring it in a humorous—sometimes black humorous type of way that makes it recognizable. Therefore it's more empowering that way for me, and I think - for individuals who experience that or see it in the show—because you can touch it and know, Okay it's there and you can just work with it and go on with it as opposed to becoming debilitated because of it when you can no longer continue to exist positively or constructively."

On The Assumed Therapeutic Quality of Art ...

"For me it's more life. It's just life. It's a constant investigation of who you are and what your environment is, and your relationship to your environment."

"It's investigative as opposed to therapeutic."

"It's getting closer to the rawness of yourself. Which is a part of the process of developing a piece."

It's—it's staying empowered when you know how absurd and overwhelming it actually is."

On The Intentional Impact of His Work & The World in General...

"...what I try to do is subvert reality because I don't think that the world we operate in is real. (pause) We have a greater sense of what reality is—we already know that deep within ourselves. But we seldom touch that. I think that's why religion is so...so big, in a sense. It allows people to get close to that—in a comfortable, nonresponsible way. Um..... we constantly live with contradictions. We live in a very, very absurd world. And...—somewhere along the way we stop admitting that, and we think "OK, it's me that's absurd—it's not the world." So we try to accommodate ourselves to function more properly within that world. But it's actually very fuckin insane, the world is like...it's crazy. Not in a bad sense—it's just like, it's a very, very strange thing if you talk about it..."

"[It's] structured, and it has lots of contradictions and finding your place within that—it's...it's a bizarre experience I think... so that's kind of what's in my mind when I'm writing and creating contradictions in some ways.. um give you freedom because when you can get to the point, you know, when—these things cannot be resolved, that you can have two totally contradictory feelings or ideas about the same thing and—you don't have to make a choice about them."

"It's very much my experience—the stories I tell and what I talk about and do are very much me. But there's a sense of room in there. To have enough room in the presentation where they can find themselves in it too, or see themselves..parts of themselves without making it totally closed and just my experience."

On Future Generations...

"Each generation of people need to keep expressing themselves because they're the ones that are actually reflecting... what's happening at that time in society... and as artists they probably—tend to speak out more, probably more truthfully, more clearly, um... and sometimes it doesn't want to be heard. But it's only those people who can do that."

On Social Change ...

"... you need people challenging [stable status quo] constantly and eroding it at the edges—and giving new ideas or re-orienting the ideas—possibilities and then those things...some of those things will get picked up and integrated as part of the community or society and that will give new health, new life to it, and allow it to survive. If it doesn't change, it will die. The civilization, will—will die because it has to be flexible and change. Each generation has new needs...not only in their personal needs but in social needs—like where we are now. We have to do something about environmental ideas."

Last Words ...

(Of his work -of life?) "I think it's evolving... I think it's evolving—but I don't know where it's going."



Barry dons full costume for *Mooseman's Boreal Bog of Spent Xmas Trees*
(Mark Bray Photo)