



Miller, Tim (b. 1958)

by Linda Rapp

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Tim Miller was a little-known performance artist until he came to national attention as one of four people denied grants from the National Endowment for the Arts because of homosexual content in their shows. Since then he has built a reputation for his witty and engaging performances that are both poignant and politically acute. Miller's performances are rooted in his own life experiences, but they are also a form of glbtq activism.

Miller comes from a middle-class California family. His father was a traveling salesman, and his mother worked in a department store. Miller, the youngest of their four children, was born September 22, 1958 in Pasadena but grew up in nearby Whittier, famous for being the birthplace of Richard Nixon.

As a youth Miller read the works of Walt Whitman and Allen Ginsberg and always felt a sense of otherness. He had an epiphany while watching a PBS show about Oscar Wilde, *Feasting with Panthers* (directed by Adrian Hall and Rick Hauser) in 1975. As he recalled in a 1992 interview, "It was like a lightning bolt from Zeus or Diana or somebody came right into our living room in Whittier, California. It was like I watched it and I said, 'Oh, OK. I'm gay, just like Oscar Wilde, just like Socrates.'" He shared the revelation with his family, all of whom were very supportive.

Miller's interest in performance began in high school, where he took classes in theater and dance. At nineteen he moved to New York and studied dance with Merce Cunningham.

Two years later, in 1980, Miller joined with Charles Moulton and Charles Dennis to found P.S. 122, a space for performance art. The name derives from the former school building that houses the project.

After seven years in New York, Miller returned to California and founded another performance space, Highways, in Santa Monica.

Miller developed shows based on his personal life as a gay man and also as an activist on behalf of the glbtq community. As a member of ACT UP and other organizations Miller has participated in numerous demonstrations to call for funding of AIDS research and treatment and to promote equal rights for glbtq people. His civil disobedience has led to his arrest on several occasions. He was beaten up by police when he protested at the Republican National Convention in 1992.

Supported in part by grants for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Miller staged his autobiographical shows before small houses until May 1990, when he suddenly found himself at the center of a political maelstrom.

In the wake of the controversy over NEA sponsorship of a Robert Mapplethorpe exhibit, Republican Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina led a campaign to prevent the NEA from funding "obscene or indecent" art. In September 1989 a congressional committee adopted language to prohibit federal grants for art that "may be considered obscene, including, but not limited to, depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the

sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts and which, when taken as a whole, do not have serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value."

On the basis of this amendment, in June 1990 NEA chairman John E. Frohnmayer denied four of eighteen proposed grants despite the unanimous favorable recommendation of a panel of artists. Three of the artists--Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes--are openly gay or lesbian, and the fourth, Karen Finley, deals in her work with various aspects of sexuality including homosexuality. All were previous recipients of NEA grants.

The NEA Four, as the group came to be known, sued the agency and Frohnmayer in federal court on the grounds that political rather than artistic motivations had led to the rejection of the grants. "There is no question that the work of these artists is considered excellent in the arts community," stated Ellen Yaroshefsky, one of their lawyers, adding, "The works talk about the victimization and powerlessness of women in our culture, the victimization of gay people, and the victimization of people with AIDS, and all of them express the views that heterosexuals and homosexuals should be treated equally."

The case was eventually settled out of court in June 1993. The four plaintiffs each received their original grants and also \$6,000 to compensate them for invasion of privacy because of alleged leaks of information about them by the NEA.

The case cost the NEA over \$200,000 in compensation to the plaintiffs' lawyers and also cost Frohnmayer his job after he admitted that he had departed from regular procedure by rejecting the panel's decisions on the NEA Four and by not permitting them to appeal his action.

Despite the settlement, however, the Clinton Justice Department appealed to preserve the "decency clause." After a trial court and a court of appeals declared the clause unconstitutional, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case. In 1998, the Supreme Court ruled that the NEA could use "general standards of decency"--a decidedly vague concept--in making funding choices.

In 1991 Miller and Hughes again applied for NEA grants, and this time each was awarded \$8,000. On that occasion Miller commented, "It's certainly nice, when panels have recommended you, that the grant doesn't get tied up in [White House chief of staff] John Sununu's office. But there's still, obviously, enormous concern. . . . The damage that's been done and that continues to be done is enormous. I know many artists now that don't even apply to the NEA." Of his own plans, he stated wryly, "I'll just continue being the little point of light that I am," echoing a catch-phrase of Republican President George H. W. Bush.

Miller proceeded to do just that, developing new shows that weave together his own experiences and the issues that are important to him.

When in November 1990 he presented his show *Stretch Marks* (which had debuted the preceding year), reviewer Steven Winn was favorably impressed, noting that it had "more to do with the connections between people than it does with nightmares and alienation" and was strongest when Miller described events in his own life rather than trying to work in extraneous material such as his indignation over the murder of nuns in El Salvador. Winn concluded that "this gentle, upbeat, predominantly positive performer poses no serious threat to the republic."

Miller received particular praise for *My Queer Body*, which he premiered in 1992. Reviewer Mike Steele found it "more poetic and metaphorical" than his previous work. In the piece Miller strips and wanders among the spectators. Steele considered Miller's "vulnerable nakedness" an effective device for discussing a world in which the body can be a source of fears because of AIDS and other hazards but also a locus of joy.

Because of the NEA controversy, many more people attended Miller's performances than ever before.

In 1997 Miller published *Shirts & Skin*, a compilation of personal stories that he had told in his shows over the previous decade. He also launched a show of the same name. Reviewer Everett Evans called Miller "one of the best of many performance artists who specialize in autobiographical monologues." He found "the vignettes . . . neatly shaped, each section ending with the punch of a decisive, often thought-provoking line." He praised Miller's "subtle skill" in his use of metaphor and noted that "his chief strengths . . . are his naturalness and genial humor."

Miller took on a new topic, immigration rights for gay and lesbian partners of American citizens, in *Glory Box* (1999), the title of which comes from the Australian term for a hope chest.

The immigration question is of prime importance to Miller because Alistair McCartney, his partner since 1994, is Australian. The couple have been through several dramas as they waited to see if visa extensions for McCartney would be granted. The most recent--and presumably final--extension will expire at the end of 2005. If no other solution can be found, the pair may move to England since McCartney holds dual Australian and British citizenship, which would allow them to take advantage of more favorable immigration laws. Another possibility is a move to Canada, where they could legally marry.

Miller took *Glory Box* on an eighty-city tour but still found time to lobby for the Permanent Partners Immigration Act, which so far has not passed in the United States Congress.

In 2002 Miller published *Body Blows*, a collection of scripts from six of his shows. He wrote essays about the genesis of each one to put them into context. The book is illustrated with photographs by Dona Ann McAdams. In the foreword Tony Kushner writes that "Tim Miller sings that song of the self which interrogates, with explosive, exploding, subversive joy and freedom, the constitution and borderlines of selfhood."

Miller chose the title of the book--and the show based upon it--to reflect "both positive and negative blows." He commented, "We are always aware of the crap that homophobia throws in our way, but also constantly reminded of the incredible sweetness and joy that gay life and love offers."

Miller returned to the theme of the problems of Americans with same-sex life partners in *Us* in 2003. The title refers both to his deep bond with McCartney and to the entity, the U.S., whose oppressive laws could prevent them from being together.

The show has a twist: Miller looks at social issues through the prism of Broadway musicals. In *Fiddler on the Roof* (book by Joseph Stein, music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick) he sees a reflection of the question of gay marriage since Tevye's daughter is willing to defy cultural convention to marry for love. In *1776* (book by Peter Stone, music and lyrics by Sherman Edwards), he sees raised the question of hypocrisy, with slave-owners extolling freedom. *South Pacific* (book by Oscar Hammerstein and Joshua Logan, music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Hammerstein), he says, "showed me you could fight bigotry while being surrounded by hunky, naked sailors and drag queens."

Critic Charles Isherwood called Miller "a frisky and charismatic performer" and found in *Us* "a sweet-spirited, honest, and seriously funny commentary on the power of popular art to shape people's moral, social, and sexual development."

Miller is fully cognizant of that power, and so he frequently gives workshops when he is on tour in order to help aspiring artists find their voices. He has also taught college courses at California State University-Los Angeles and UCLA, where he is an adjunct Assistant Professor in the School of Theater, Film and Television.

Miller won a 2006 Lambda Literary Award for *1001 Beds*, a collection of performance scripts, essays, interviews, and journal entries. The collection illustrates vividly the way his performance pieces and his gay activism are inextricably linked.

In a 2002 interview Miller spoke of the relationship between him and his audience: "I feel so lucky to have had the opportunity to be telling these tales of sex and love and loss and hope. While I hope my shows have emboldened and entertained my audience, the truth is the thousands and thousands of people who have seen my shows have also totally inspired me with their courage."

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