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David Steinberg

Fine Art Sex Photographer / Journalist

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Sins Invalid: An unashamed look at sex, beauty and disability

Who is sexy? Who is sexual? Who is sexually desirable? Who is sexually vibrant?

Are the people that society designates "beautiful" really sexier or more sexual than the people who get labeled "plain"?

What about older people, heavier people? What about people with disabilities? Are these people fully sexual human beings even though they don't show up in movies, on tv, or in advertising? What happens to all of us when we write off huge sections of the population as non-sexual or sexually undesirable?

These are some of the questions addressed in *Sins Invalid: An Unashamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility*, whose fourth annual multi-media presentation is being performed this coming weekend at the Brava Theater.

Most specifically, *Sins Invalid* is about the sexuality of people with physical disabilities -- an opportunity for people with disabilities to affirm and celebrate the vibrancy of their sexuality through performance art, theater, film, dance, song, and the spoken word. The cabaret-style performances in *Sins Invalid* range from mild to graphic, from tender to passionate, from the gentle spoken word to a sexually explicit depiction of a scene involving loving dominance and submission.

"The theme of this year's show is the magic of embodiment," says Patty Berne, artistic director of *Sins Invalid*, "the magic of all life and the spirit incarnate." The 12 artists in *Sins Invalid* all possess disabilities, some quite apparent, others less so, such as deafness and environmental illness and injuries. "Each of these artists is in a non-normative body," Berne notes, "and each is a miraculous, sexual being."

Sins Invalid was founded in 2006 by Patty Berne and Leroy Moore, two Bay Area activists with disabilities who were frustrated with the propensity of many to view people with disabilities as asexual, deviant, or undesirable. "We wanted to address the disconnect between what we know to be true about our beauty and what the world seems to believe -- that we are 'less than,' undesirable and pitiable," Berne explains.



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But *Sins Invalid* is more than a statement about sex and disability, going beyond the specific issue of discounting the sexuality of people with disabilities to challenge a whole range of conventional notions about what is normal, what is beautiful, and what is sexy. In place of the familiar notion that sex, beauty and desirability are limited to people who are young, thin, and physically agile, *Sins Invalid* offers "a vision of beauty and sexuality inclusive of all individuals and communities," an affirmation that we are all sexual, all sexy, all attractive, regardless of age, body form, or skin color.

What makes *Sins Invalid* so powerful is that it thoroughly succeeds artistically and erotically, separate from the impact of its political message. *Sins Invalid* challenges its audience to think about sexuality, beauty, and disability in new and expanded ways. But *Sins Invalid* is also, quite simply, a hot, arousing, sexually charged evening of thought-provoking, imaginative sexual entertainment that only happens to be entirely by and about people with

disabilities.

Editor's note: This is an SFGate.com City Brights Blog. These blogs are not written or edited by SFGate or the San Francisco Chronicle. The authors are solely responsible for the content.

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Mat Fraser, a celebrated disabled performer from Great Britain offers "No Retreat, No Surrender," an athletic performance piece using martial arts, and "Beautiful Freak," a tender cleansing ritual. Antoine-DeVinci Hunter, an accomplished deaf choreographer/dancer, asks the audience to share the element of risk he faces every day as a deaf person by rolling a die, each side of which corresponds to a different sound score.

In "The Scene," Leroy Moore, seeley quest, Ralph Dickinson and Patty Berne enact a sexual encounter in which a dominatrix conducts an erotic medical procedure, captured on live video feed integrated with surreal images. Nomy Lamm offers two rock-opera pieces involving a "nest of legs" comprised of the prosthetic limbs that she has worn since she was a child. Spoken word pieces are offered by Leah Lakshmi ("Dirty River Girl"), Maria Palacios ("The Hunger" and "Vagina Manifesto"), and Aurora Levins Morales.



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20	21	22	23	24	25	26
27	28	29	30	31		



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Sins Invalid will be performed at Brava Theater, 2789 24th Street (at York), San Francisco, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, October 2, 3, and 4, Friday and Saturday shows at 8:00, Sunday at 7:00. All shows are wheelchair accessible and ASL interpreted. Tickets are \$15-25, sliding scale (no one turned away for lack of funds), available from brownpapertickets.com, or at the door. More information at sinsinvalid.org, or 510-689-7198.

[Note: The photographs shown here are from my own body of sexual photography involving people with disabilities. They are not part of the *Sins Invalid* performance. For more about my photography of people with disabilities, see

www.nearbycafe.com/loveandlust/steinberg/photo/disability.html and www.nearbycafe.com/loveandlust/steinberg/photo/disintro.html.]

[If you'd like to email me directly, or to be on my confidential mailing list and receive notices of future blog posts, books, and speaking engagements, you can reach me at david@davidsteinberg.us.

Four books of my writing and photography -- *Divas of San Francisco: Portraits of Transsexual Women*; *Photo Sex: Fine Art Sexual Photography Comes of Age*; *Erotic by Nature: A Celebration of Life, of Love, and of Our Wonderful Bodies*; and *The Erotic Impulse: Honoring the Sensual Self* -- are available from me directly, or from Amazon.]

Posted By: [David Steinberg \(Email\)](#) | September 30 2009 at 12:19 AM

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jazna1 12/4/2009 10:57:17 AM

A few years ago I had a couple of exhilarating months with a vital, lusty, extremely confident sexy man who had lost one of his legs in a motorcycle accident. After his accident he took up sailing; he was a terror at the helm. the wilder the weather the better. He has more enthusiasm and lust for life than any man I've ever known. Maybe it was looking death in the face that made him that way but whatever it was, I will never forget his rakish smile and hearty laugh. Too bad he turned out to be married. He is divorced now and with a woman who is as much a force of nature as he is.

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outsidelookinin 10/1/2009 3:37:10 PM

Everyone should be able to enjoy their sexuality, regardless of how a person looks or if they have a disability.

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Maury 9/30/2009 8:04:30 PM

Thank you David for your beautiful photo essay on sex and the disabled. I'll try to get to see *Sins Invalid*.

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TUESDAY, OCTOBER 27, 2009

Sins Invalid – Brava Theater: San Francisco, CA (10/04/2009)



As a dancer, I feel most alive when I'm present in my body; when I breathe hard, feel the power of my feet on the ground, and sense the weight in my head and arms. To feel embodied is an exhilarating experience, and after seeing [Sins Invalid's fourth annual performance](#), "An Unashamed Claim to Beauty in the Face of Invisibility," I was struck by the complexities of being present and proud in a body that can make others feel deeply uncomfortable.

The show opens on Matt Fraser, a disabled performer, dancing naked, unashamedly, and beautifully as an audio recording berates him. Instead of

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music that reflects the grace and power of Frasier's movement, the audience (and Frasier) is bombarded with voices that echo the internal reactions many have to seeing a body different from what they perceive as normal. As I watched Frasier throw himself across the stage, it became clear that for him to feel embodied takes more strength and courage than most people are asked to summon in a lifetime.

Sins Invalid is a performance project that celebrates artist with disabilities, centralizing those who are queer and gender-variant. The project itself was conceived of, and is run by, disabled artists of color whose mission is to redefine beauty, sexiness, and normality to include people of all marginalized communities. From the cheers, whoops, and applause I heard during the show, it was clear the audience was overwhelmingly supportive of and inspired by Sins Invalid's mission. When confronted with the bodies of the performers, the audience became audibly excited rather than uncomfortable. They embraced the idea that resonates throughout the show: every body is beautiful.

I braced myself as the narrator announced we were about to witness a piece that contained S&M. I wasn't sure if, in addition to wrapping my head around the difficulties that disabled men and women face, I could watch human beings inflict pain onto one another only twenty feet in front of me. As it turns out, the humor and wit that Ralph Dickinson, Leroy Franklin Moore Jr., and Seeley Quest brought to the stage was a delightful celebration of sexuality and seduction. Watching the dominatrix role-play with her client validated the disabled client's sexuality in a refreshing and empowering way.

As the show progressed, I kept thinking to myself, "any discomfort the audience feels is not even a fraction of the discomfort that some of the individuals on stage or those they represent feel daily." While it was wonderful to see an audience seeking out and finding empowerment in Sins Invalid's show, I believe it is equally important for those who wouldn't seek it out to experience it as well. I can imagine a different audience—perhaps less open to or familiar with the ideas brought up during the performance—that might have felt troubled by certain moments of the evening. To face the pain and suffering of others takes will power.

Sins Invalid speaks to those who are rendered invisible, as well as to those who render others invisible; we're all on both sides of the equation at some point in our lives. To watch the beauty and struggle of embodiment is an important experience for both the body and mind.

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Disability is not always a limiting term. Sins Invalid performance is a living, dancing testament to that fact

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Power, Sex, Body:
An Interview with Patty Berne
and Leroy F. Moore Jr. of Sins Invalid
BY ADELE NIEVES

from make/shift magazine: ISSUE 6, FALL/WINTER 2009/2010

Sins Invalid is a performance and political-education project that nurtures and celebrates artists with disabilities, focusing on artists of color and queer and gender-variant artists. Based in San Francisco, the eight-member group organizes both multidisciplinary performances and political workshops for the Bay Area community and beyond. Adele Nieves spoke with cofounders Patty Berne and Leroy F. Moore Jr. about Sins Invalid and its work.

AN: You describe Sins Invalid as “an unshamed claim to beauty in the face of invisibility.” That’s incredibly powerful. Can you explain the purpose of Sins Invalid?

PB: We began as a place for cultural work around disability, race, gender, and sexuality. We started as a performance project only, and have expanded to include performance workshops and political-education workshops. The purpose is to have a synergistic site where we as queer crips, brown crips—or people who aren’t queer, brown, or disabled—come together with the marginalized communities we’re engaging with and their allies to think about these issues and put out our thoughts through a creative medium.

LM: Our performance work explores sexuality and embodiment in the disabled body, and challenges the paradigms of “normal” and “sexy.” Instead, we offer a vision of beauty and sexuality that includes all communities. Our goals are to promote leadership within our own communities and the larger social-justice movement, to provide support and political engagement for artists with disabilities to develop compelling artistic works exploring sexuality and non-normative bodies.

PB: There’s a lot of engagement around what’s now called “intersectionality.” While a lot of it is kind of academic, there is a way the reality of our lives can communicate very simply what seems a complex concept. None of us are one-dimensional in who we are or the communities we engage in; none of us are *either* people of color *or* queer *or* female bodies—that’s absurd. Our bodies themselves are the best communication of those politics. For us, doing it through cultural work is one of the best, most clear ways to engage around “intersectionality” without all the academic jargon.

As we’ve grown, we’ve realized the need for something that is not just a show, but an incubation spot, a cross-education spot, as well as a spot where we can engage in our healing.

Where did the name come from?

PB: It's a claim to beauty and power in the face of a system that tells us that we aren't beautiful, that we don't have power, that collectively and as individuals we are expendable. As people of color, as people with disabilities, as disabled people of color, we're told we're expendable. The eugenics programs and the fucking ugly-duckling and makeover shows all communicate this idea.

That anyone is expendable is so blatantly untrue to me, and to those of us who live and know our beauty and our power, and aren't afraid of being who we are.

The name references "invalid," which is what we're often referred to as. That's just inane, it doesn't apply to any human. The name also plays on the idea of "sin"—meaning "without"—so, without the concept of the invalid. It's also a play on words in terms of our bodies, or the act of embodiment somehow being original sin, or a problem to overcome.

That's the conventional understanding of disability.

PB: That's the framework of disability offered by the culture—we have problem bodies that can be overcome. What is *that*? Our bodies, being queer, or having a gender-variant body—these are not problems to overcome. I have a wheelchair for mobility. The problem for me is being in a society where some people are marginalized because we're non-normative—*that* is the problem to overcome, not my body. It's my body. Some things about it I love, some things about it drive me nuts. It's the same with most people, I imagine. What oppresses me is not what my body can or can't do; what oppresses me is disability oppression, or ableism.

How did you choose this particular activism?

LM: Being a writer, poet, researcher, and activist, I've always had serious questions about how society sees people with disabilities. After years of activism around disability policy, I wanted to make the two into one work of political education and communication. In 2004 or 2005, I did a film, *Forbidden Acts*, with Patty and Todd Herman, who is also on the board of Sins Invalid, of poems focused on disability and sexuality.

PB: I've done organizing and advocacy with multiple communities. The last thing I did was direct a project on reproductive and genetic technologies, with The Center for Genetics and Society. I was immersed in texts and arguments all basically arguing that with the new emerging technologies in genetics, "we can get rid of the problem of disability."

After three days of maturation, a fertilized egg can have one cell removed for testing. At that point, you can make some assumptions about its genetic composition; for example, as the egg develops, the zygote will potentially have Down syndrome, or eventually have a body like mine, or something. This of course was regarded as the "undesirable zygote" because it won't create a "perfect" baby. As I was advocating for an examination of what it means to select the kind of children appropriate to breed, I was constantly trying to argue the legitimacy of my existence.

They are looking for the “gay” gene, looking for the “color” gene. So much of that work was about trying to legitimize the existence of certain communities. That’s really depressing, honestly.

We were trying to bring social-justice values to the conversation of reproductive and genetic technologies. In no way, shape, or form were we saying women don’t have the right to choose whether or not to have a child, but we were asking if people really have the right to choose what *kind* of child—if it’s going to be able-bodied, light-skinned, or heterosexual? That’s eugenics.

In a society lacking health care, where a wheelchair costs thousands of dollars, it’s understandable for parents to make choices based in part on economics. But people are also making choices in the context of a society where people with non-normative bodies are seen as mistakes.

After a certain point I couldn’t stomach having to argue the legitimacy of my existence and my communities. So when we talked about doing a show, it was like, “YES!—let’s celebrate who we are, our beauty, our joys, and of course our pains, and what we get off on.” There is so little dialogue about disability and sexuality within any kind of politicized framework, much less a social-justice framework. So we thought, “We’ll frame it the way it *should* be framed,” because we were cocky [*Laughs*].

A common theme in reviews of *Sins Invalid* performances is that you challenge perceptions and assumptions about what “disability” means and looks like, as well as what sexuality/sensuality means.

LM: I think *Sins* just lays out stories about people with disabilities and sexuality. It’s too bad that it is viewed as challenging for society, because it’s just reality. It’s the reality that you might have a person with a disability visiting a dominatrix, like we did in a show last year.

PB: Challenging the idea of disability is central to all our work. People understand “ability” as cut-and-dried. You’re either “normal” or “handicapped,” when in fact, for most of human existence, people’s capacities and abilities are on a large spectrum, and not all of them are visible. People iconize a wheelchair—not the person in the wheelchair, but the wheelchair—as a symbol of disability, but it’s much broader than that. People have chronic illnesses, AIDS, cognitive challenges, emotional disabilities, mobility impairment . . . humans manifest in all kinds of ways, right? There isn’t a cutoff line, like in workers’ compensation.

LM: The media portrays certain images and concepts of people with disabilities; people with outdated politics like the *Jerry Lewis Telethon*, or the late-night commercials with disabled people looking for a cure. *Sins Invalid* is not trickle-down; it’s coming from the community. People with disabilities have always been here. We have a life, we have sexuality, and we’re doing our own thing.

PB: People have this media-informed charity model of disability in their minds, associated with dependency, being childlike, being asexual. That’s what we’re trying to disrupt. We’re out there on stage, and audiences are enjoying our power and our beauty and who we are. [*Laughs*] It’s kind of absurd, you know? I love the work we do, and I see

how it's needed, but at the same time I wonder, why is it so revolutionary or groundbreaking, when all we're doing is asserting we're humans? It's absurd.

It is absurd. But here we are.

PB: Yeah, here we are! [*Laughs*] People see this man who can't speak, and has all these things going on, and it's like, "Wow, he's human!" Yes, he is! Whether people speak the way you speak, walk the way you walk, or have the same skin color, we all want action. We all want to be acknowledged as viable erotic beings, as viable political agents, *because we are.*

Each performance touches on our sexuality and disability in some way. One submission for this year (from Nomy Lamm) is about a creature whose power is sex. We want to explore how our sexuality can be a creature, and creatures can be fierce and ferocious. We are also trying to deconstruct the idea of "sexual" as magical, and how the body in all its manifestations can contain beauty and power.

[Going back to] the S-M piece we performed in 2007—people are so fraught with myth of what it means to have a non-normative body, they're afraid to engage with them sexually. So the idea that someone with a disability might want to be a bottom or a top can really disarm people.

After the performance, the actor that played the dom asked the audience, "How was that to watch a Black, disabled man being submissive? Did it turn you on, or freak you out? Did it reinforce the image of the one-dimensional handicapped victim, or revive the specter of the twisted cripple acting out in perverse ways? And who is in control here—the dom or the submissive? The sex worker or the client?"

You're disrupting a lot of assumptions.

PB: For us to be full and whole as humans, we have to hold all of humanity. Think of the cost to all of us when we don't acknowledge folks who are incarcerated and then not integrated back into community. Or when we don't acknowledge people who might be phenomenal teachers, but because they have something anomalous about them—they speak slowly, or, god forbid, come from another country, they aren't seen as someone who can teach. When we don't see all of what we are, we're limiting ourselves.

The disability community offers other communities the ability to see people's capacities. When you live with your capacities questioned in some ways, it forces you to reject the framework of limitations. If I didn't reject it, I wouldn't leave the house, I wouldn't look in the mirror. In order to live, I have to see my wholeness.

Who are you most hoping to reach?

LM: Our own communities. People-of-color communities need education around disability, sexuality, and race, as well as the activist communities in general. Then we can go broader.

PB: Our purpose is to shift multiple communities toward wholeness. Within the social-justice movement, it is still absurdly rare to hear disability and ableism addressed, and it certainly hasn't challenged its own ableism. If you're going to work in a low-income community, you're going to work with people with disabilities. You can't *not* address it.

Disability is a social construction, and it occurs within a broader framework. So part of our mission is to challenge the social-justice movement, but also challenge the disability-rights movement to address its own stuff. It's a pretty single-issue movement that doesn't look at other forms of oppression. If we're going to have any success with building a movement for liberation, none of us are expendable; we have to build a cross-movement.

Leroy, I know you're working outside Sins Invalid with other artists and groups. Whose art are you inspired by?

LM: This project called Krip-Hop, a hip hop project by artists with disabilities. There are so many people doing such great work. There's this album that just came out by Staff Benda Bilili, a group of disabled artists from the Congo. I mean, you think we have it hard here; they're living on the streets, but they're really doing their music and their activism. They call themselves the real beat reporters of the Congo.

Also, Black disabled people in London who, I think, started the first Black disabled-rights movement. They really inspired me; that's when I changed my whole view of always asking white disability organizations to deal with race. After I saw them, I thought, *It's time for us to have our own thing. Instead of asking, just do it.*

For me, the most exciting activism today is based on the creation or envisioning of alternatives to systematic oppression. What kind of alternative are you envisioning with Sins Invalid?

PB: A celebration of who we are. The whole point of political struggle is so we can live and be our best, beautiful selves. Part of the gift cultural work is is not to inspire struggle, but to inspire the purpose for struggle. And part of that, for me, is sex [*Laughs*].

That's part of the good stuff of being human. Looking, wanting it, and enjoying it. God, we're in bodies for a reason, you know? I could go on and on about sex, but I won't because that's a whole other conversation. [*Laughs*]

I notice something interesting, that your questions didn't address sexuality as much as they did political framing. A whole other conversation is the political imperative behind disability and sexuality. That's what Dorothy Roberts's work is about. It's not as simple as "we want to be seen as sexy." When you control the sexuality and the reproductive capacity of a community, you control that community. Controlling sexuality is a great way to erase the soul of a person. It's why, regrettably, sexual violence is such a powerful weapon in war. Sexuality is power, and when it becomes the vehicle for violence, you can really destroy a community.

Do you structure any of your workshops around this?

PB: Yes. We cater the workshops to the groups we're engaging with. If a group has never really engaged with the idea of disability, then we'll help people apply the same tools they've used around other forms of oppression. If people have engaged around disability, then we can expand into the nuances, and into the political imperative behind organizing around embodiment and sexuality.

We ask people to meet us where we are, and we will meet people where they are. If we are saying people have to be in a specific place in order to engage with us, it's elitist as well as a failure to address the complexities of working in multiple communities.

Even within marginalized communities, some of us might not be ready for Sins Invalid. We may feel empowered, but are still not ready to participate.

PB: That's true. The first time I ever saw disabled artists was the AXIS Dance Company, based in Oakland, California. When I first saw their show, all of my shit came flying back in my face. All my stuff about movement, what could be considered "dance," what was considered "beautiful"? It just triggered all this stuff, and I didn't know whether or not I should run in fear. When our internalized messages are challenged, it forces us to think differently about ourselves and the world we are in, to not shrink, and to work with ourselves and other people. It's also a huge opportunity to create a more loving relationship with oneself and with others.

So it has been beautiful, but also challenging for those of us who participate. We want it to be everything: our home, our political community, our artistic community, our family, and our social network, and one organization cannot be all that. We need so many different spaces—geographic, physical, and psychic spaces—to challenge the social-justice movement to integrate and address disability oppression. We need a place where we can do some healing, as well. It's kind of a tall order [*Laughs*].

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PREVIEW

SINS INVALID



By: Teri

The imagery of Cirque Du Soleil is globally recognized for its aesthetic beauty, the grace of fluid bodies performing defying acts.

Not often are these descriptions given to the disabled...until now.

Sins Invalid's work is a vibrant necessity in this age

of bland complacency. They take the medical and societal parameters that have historically relegated the disabled citizen to a less than second class position and they throw it aside.

The art that is presented brings the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and ability and throws it in your face, forcing the viewer to come to terms with how these realities are not so different and yet so different for those with disabilities. And this is beautifully done with the erotic and the body.

Feminists are quite familiar with the politics of the body. How familiar are feminists with the issues that surround persons with disabilities?

The medical model, as often brought to the forefront with reproductive rights, illustrates how the medical industry continues eugenics with regular genetic testing on the fetus. If a fetus is shown to have a defect, the usual course is abortion. Why is this a normality? What is spoken in our society that says what is outside of societal norms is wrong? Are only "perfect" babies acceptable? Isn't the argument of financial costs a reflection of our health system rather than a reason for deeming a group of people inferior?

Looking upon the video of the 

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wheelchair suspension, the imagery of Cirque du Soleil comes to mind. The dance of the body and metal as one, the musculature of the body glistening in the spotlight, the amazing ability of a person who outside of this performance would have their competence questioned...



Sins Invalid brings to the forefront many important issues and questions that is crucial for all activist movements to bring under their wing. Marginalization of any group of persons is detrimental to all.

Sins Invalid shows that the issues we fight for can come in many forms...their form illustrates the beauty of sensuality and the beauty of all bodies...especially when stripped of limiting ideology.

<http://www.sinsinvalid.org/video.html>

Posted by [paledamiana](#) 

3 COMMENTS:

[Glammie](#) said...

Thanks for posting this unique, beautiful piece, Terri!

I was just a little concerned about the use of the term eugenics in reference to pre-natal care and tests. Although doctors are notorious for not gracefully allowing patients their own health rights, they are still required to. Ultimately, it is each woman's choice to abort a fetus or not, not her doctor's, irregardless of the reason. I'm under the impression that these genetic tests are normally only requested/performed when one or both parents are known carriers based on whichever condition is under concern. The fact that you dare us to question some common reasonings, I think is noteworthy. I'm sure all of us hope decisions are reached in this matter with more vital concerns, like the pain and survivability of the anticipated child based on the condition, rather than concerns based on vanity and disillusionment. I even was told in class that a patient had a test done that showed an indication of a deformity, but it couldn't be narrowed down. It wasn't until the child was several years old and the doctor who taught my class saw him, that the parent ever discovered what the deformity was: Klippel-Feil Syndrome, a rather benign set of anomalies in the cervical spine. I hope all parents making this decision are being educated on the range of conditions they might be facing.

I'm not sure if I conveyed that thought clearly, so if I leave anyone confused as to my intent, just ask. :)

JULY 14, 2009 5:47 PM

[Brook Buesking](#) said...

Wow! I watched Rodney Bell's video.



Tamara



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Quintessence

Sins Invalid puts the spotlight on sexuality and disability

09.30.09 - 1:41 am | [Victoria Nguyen \(/category/author/victoria-nguyen\)](#) |  (0)

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Nomy Lamm, writer

THEATER San Francisco's Brava Theatre is mostly dark, except for the spotlights on stage. Under the white light, singer Nomy Lamm's face peers out from under the beak of a vulture headpiece. She flaps her feathered wings and thrusts her hips, like she is working a hula hoop in slow motion.

"I remember the feel of your hands on my body," Lamm sings. "Makes me scream, 'Am I broken?'"

It is three weeks before the premiere of this year's *Sins Invalid*'s performance art show of the same name, and artistic director Patty Berne sits near the back of the theater. She watches Lamm's rehearsal intently, and as the performance ends, her face splits into an approving smile. "Oh Nomy, I am so frickin' excited," Berne exclaims. "That was so hot — you don't even know!"

Currently in its fourth year, *Sins Invalid* is an annual performance project about sexuality and disability. The upcoming show, which runs for three nights at Brava, showcases 12 performances from local and international artists, including Oakland's Seeley Quest and the U.K.'s Mat Fraser. The collection of theatrical, musical, spoken word, and multimedia performances includes passages that are confrontational and provocative and moments that are soft and sweet.

According to Berne, who is also the cofounder of *Sins*, the show's dimensions reflect the diverse issues that people with disabilities face, living in societies where they are traditionally perceived as unsexy, or even sexless. "[People with disabilities] are thought of as asexual and [it's assumed] that our lives are defined by our disabilities," she says. "Thinking that we are neutered is absurd. It's like assuming parents stop having sex because they have a child."

According to the *Sins Invalid* mission statement, the performance project not only supports artists with disabilities, it also strives to centralize "artists of color and queer and gender-variant artists." The goal of the organization, explained cofounder Leroy Moore, has been to create a community of historically marginalized artists and to provide a mirror for those who are disabled, queer, or of color.

The tone of this year's two-hour show is set with Lamm's opening act, "a sexy monster rock opera" called *The Reckoning*. Dressed as a vulture, Lamm plays a dejected animal that struggles to know itself and its place in the universe. In the more intimate *Bird Song*, she is an abandoned baby bird that sings from a nest made of stuffed panty hose and prosthetic legs.

"[*Bird Song*] is about quiet power. It's like, 'I know what I have, and when you're ready to see it, come say hi,'" said Lamm.

Other artists, among them Fraser and choreographer/dancer Antoine Hunter, use their bodies to create powerful performances. In the solo act *No Retreat, No Surrender*, Fraser taps into his martial arts training to simulate being physically beaten to a soundtrack of insults commonly hurled by ableists. In *The Scene*, theater marries film in a sexually explicit and tense performance about a man who visits a dominatrix and unexpectedly undergoes an inner transformation.

Moore, who plays the visitor in *The Scene*, explained that in addition to flipping the notion of who visits a dominatrix, the piece is about loving oneself. "In the beginning [of the scene, the man going to the domme] is not sure what to expect. At the end, he comes to love himself and know 'I am beautiful.'"

Since the inaugural *Sins Invalid* showing at Brava in 2006, what once was a one-night annual event has blossomed into a three evenings of performance. According to Berne, previous shows have packed full houses.

“Comments”



Sexuality Blog

By [Cory Silverberg](#), About.com Guide to Sexuality

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Website to Watch: Sins Invalid

Monday April 27, 2009

[Sins Invalid](#) is a performance project, a show and a group of artists who I guarantee will show you something you haven't seen about sex, about gender, about race, and about yourself. The project was conceived and is led by disabled people of color, and the work (which is shown in annual performances and workshops mostly in the Bay area) explores sexuality, embodiment, and the disabled body.

If you're thinking to yourself, "I'm non-disabled, this has nothing to do with me," think again. It's hard to explain but as someone who is currently non-disabled and spends most of my time thinking about sex, I can tell you that the most practical and profound stuff I've learned about sexuality I learned from Disability. You may not get it at first, but Sins Invalid is as much about you as it is about anyone.

The truth is that when it comes to sexuality we are more the same than we are different. As deeply ingrained in our psyches as it is, the idea of sexual differences (based on what you look like, who you lust after or love, who you sex with) is a distortion of actual experience. It's a convenient way to keep some of us feeling powerful and right, but we all lose in the end.

By offering something so honest and direct about their sexual selves, the performers who make up Sins Invalid open up the opportunity to briefly remove the distorted view we have of sex, gender, race, the body, beauty, and pleasure.

The best part of the site for me was delving into the video archives of performances. The opening to the 2008 show with [Rodney Bell and seeley quest](#) (with, I think, the voice of artistic director Patty Berne) was an awesome mix of uncertainty and sexy, fear and desire. I'm still trying to figure out all the different things I feel about [Cara Page and Leroy Moore's](#) performance. And any opportunity to hear [Nomy Lamm's songs](#) - always a mixture of sad and funny, delicate and raunchy - is a treat.

The promise of the site is "an unashamed claim to beauty in the face of invisibility" and having only been through about a quarter of the site I can say they deliver on it big time.

Check it out - [Sins Invalid Online](#)

Photo of Cara Page courtesy of Richard Downing.



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Comments

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