

Performance Artist Patrick Scully

Scully Goes Gray

by Wendell Ricketts

It's usually a mistake to make comparisons, but indulge me when I say that Minneapolis-based performance artist Patrick Scully is a bit like a queer Spalding Gray. The image is meant to be flattering to both of them.

What Scully does best is tell stories. Like Gray, Scully's stories come from his own life: travails at work, sagas of boyfriends and lovers, struggles to proclaim a healthy sexuality in a community that AIDS has made increasingly ambivalent about the pleasures of the body.

There's a certain midwestern obliqueness in Scully's manner that can be wonderful. It's the gentle, seemingly goal-less delivery that Garrison Keillor at first made his trademark and later turned into a caricature. But the best of Scully's vignettes have that "come along and journey with me" quality.

In his recent show at Josie's, Scully puts this distinctive style at the service of articulating what he calls *Queer Thinking* — the show's title. And it is in that attempt that Scully sometimes stumbles.

From an engaging and creative beginning, in which Scully appears as Tanya, an alter ego who dresses in a pillbox hat and a jacket that one imagines could have been designed for Liberace, Scully wanders off into a series of anecdotes. Some are absorbing in themselves, some run

out of gas somewhere down the road, and some try so hard to establish a moral that they collapse in self-consciousness.

Fuzzy

In one, for example, Scully recounts being assaulted in his home by a man who offers him sex and then tries to rob him. To a point, the story is compelling. But once Scully begins to describe how police officers treat him with only half-hearted interest and explain how an indifferent "system" fails to endorse his quest for justice, the recitation becomes mundane. It isn't Scully's story anymore. Instead, it's a parable of how gay men are victimized by violence while society refuses to take the situation seriously.

Well, maybe that's true. But maybe it's also true that "society" doesn't take many acts of violence seriously. Scully, at least, has a friend in the DA's office who calls with advice about how to navigate the bureaucracy; the police officers Scully meets are polite, if nonchalant, and inspectors return his phone calls. If he were a straight black man in Compton — instead of a gay white man in Minneapolis — Scully wouldn't have gotten that much.

But I digress. Elsewhere, Scully makes the standard swipes at closeted gays without acknowledging the fact that most homosexual and bisexual men and women in America are in the closet, a

reality that has never once been accounted for in the half-decade of "queer theory" we have thus far endured.

Scully subtly criticizes "butchness" as somehow counter-revolutionary, which leads to the conclusion that "real" queer men can't be (shouldn't be?) too masculine. This is not exactly a progressive concept.

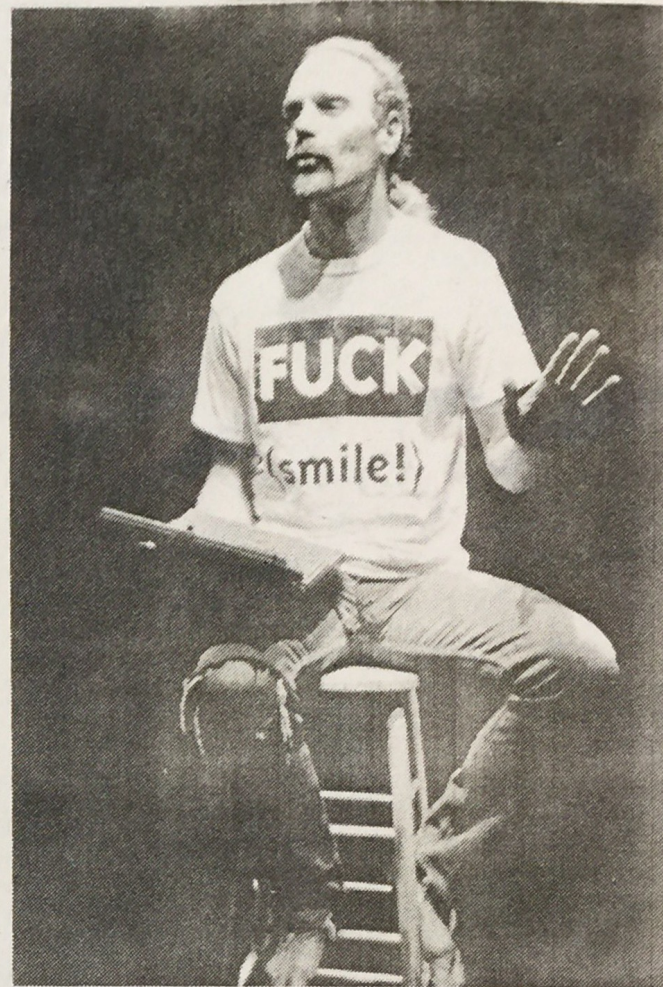
Show and tell

He describes a nearly exclusive passion for black men, but never gets at what that attraction represents or how racial and cultural differences play themselves out in his relationships. (I mean, race can be racy; but let's not pretend it doesn't mean anything.)

Finally, Scully observes, with a hint of reproach, the fact that success in modern gay male life seems guaranteed to those who possess at least two of the following three: a pretty face, a muscled body, and a big dick.

Scully, however, not only talks about his own big dick (and, lest he be accused of abusing his artistic license, shows it), he admits to being a size queen. That said, it would have been interesting to know how Scully reconciles these facts with his view that "queer" culture over-emphasizes physical appearance.

Admittedly, this has been the scenic route to saying that Scully doesn't exactly reach the heart of the semantic, ethical, and political conflicts



Patrick Scully: defining and undefining queer theory.

that "queer thinking" presents for today's homosexually-inclined. The problem with defining "queer thinking" — a predicament that "queer" arts and letters, "queer" studies, and "queer" theory all share — is that the terms don't actually mean anything. Or, perhaps better put, they mean whatever anyone who uses them says they mean.

In the end, of course, that's precisely the point: the beauty of a concept like "queer" is that people can and do use it

to establish themselves as any sort of "other" they want. It bespeaks a kind of anarchy of personal identity.

It is, nonetheless, tortuous to define oneself as "not something," as Scully does when he constructs "queerness" out of "not male, not female, not straight, not gay, not femme, not butch, not top, not bottom." Even if the current rage is for this sort of scruffy thinking, the attempt only winds up reinforcing the very categories it hopes to crush. ▼