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Visions of Queertopia find their form

2010 Queer Arts Festival raises its performance component with more music, theatre and workshops

By Jennifer Moss, Special To The Sun

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The Roundhouse Community Centre might seem like a queer place to find Utopia, and it is.

For the next 2 ½ weeks, the centre is home to the Queer Arts Festival, a heady melange of fine art, music and theatre, affectionately dubbed Queertopia by its organizers.

"We thought we'd try to create a place where queer was the norm," says producing director Sean Cummings. "But we're not advocating one particular vision. All art is about questioning. We asked individual artists to present their view of what Queertopia would be, and we've had a lot of different takes on it."

Cummings, who is also the artistic director of Vancouver theatre company Screaming Weenie Productions, has ensured that Queertopia includes plenty of actors.

"In the past, this was primarily a visual art event," she says. "But since last year there has been a strong performance component. We are running a workshop series called Clean Sheets, the only one of its kind in Canada. The goal is to provide opportunities for playwrights to develop their writing."

Asked how it works, Cummings says: "We select a handful of plays that deal with queer themes. Then they go through a process with professional actors and dramaturges that is open to the public."

This year's featured playwrights are Lawrence Aronovitch, Jan Derbyshire and Deidre Walton. Cummings emphasizes the inclusivity of the festival. "We want to expose this work to a larger audience," he says.

And if a straight playwright submitted work that dealt with queer themes? "We would theoretically be open to that," she said.

Above all, the festival wants to provide queer artists with opportunities that don't exclude, but nevertheless range beyond those bastions of gay pride events, drag queens and buttless chaps. For instance, the featured performer is renowned concert pianist Sara Davis Buechner. In her Friday night set, Buechner will trace her life story and transgender journey, illustrated with works by Bach, Mozart,

Chopin, Nishimura and Vancouver's Jared Miller, and closing with her signature finale, Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue.

Visual arts continue to form the backbone of this festival, and nowhere is Queertopia more visible than in the diverse presentations of the Roundhouse exhibit. There are some 23 visual artists featured in the festival, whose work was selected from more than 60 submissions.

Jeff Gibson has been with the festival for years and is the associate producer of the visual arts show.

"When you walk into the Roundhouse, you can't help but notice the large installation by Dana Ayotte," he says. The piece, a large, welded steel rod and red cloth sculpture entitled Gethen Womb rains down in Kemmer, "talks about the womb being a central place where life begins, the place that cradles all life, diversity, the birthing place to all of us."

He also singles out Victoria artist Karina Kalvaitis, who has contributed two mobiles called Annadale 1 & 2. "The two mixed-media sculptures look like planets in a solar system. Each felt planet is different," decorated in a highly individualistic way, "emphasizing the diversity of the queer community," says Gibson.

"It's a vision of Queertopia where even the planets are queer," Cummings says.

There's also artist Wendy Sexsmith, whose whimsical oil painting, titled Permanently Pressed Bunny Board, has been used as the festival's poster image. The painting depicts a bunny-suit clad man (looking like a coy refugee from last year's pride parade) pressed demurely against an ironing board.

Cummings says it was selected as the poster because of the way it integrates queer themes with the conventional domestic world, reflecting the mandate of the festival itself. "The odd, sideways look on the bunny-man's face says, 'Okay, so now we've been accepted. Now what?'"

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QUEER ARTS FESTIVAL

Where: Roundhouse Community Centre

When: Today to Aug. 14

Gallery hours: Weekdays 10 a.m.-10 p.m., weekends 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

Information: prideinart.ca