

FLYING WITH THE SPIRIT

Annie Frazier is one of a growing number of West Coast performance poets giving their traditionally cloistered art a new exuberance.

■ Feature by Karen Romell Photography by Kiku Hawkes ■

Annie Frazier is snaking around the Great Hall at the UBC Museum of Anthropology, dressed in a hand-painted Kwagiutl totem costume and Thunderbird mask. Around her the haunting icons of West Coast aboriginal culture - totem poles, carved feast bowls and canoes - sternly stare down their human counterparts. She draws herself up, then brings her head down and raises her arms. It's a gesture which effectively effaces Frazier, the performance poet, and puts in her place a mesmerizing and entirely believable Thunderbird.

In performance Frazier is chameleon-like, one minute resembling a tall, long-haired *kd lang* in a full skirt and western boots, another moment enclosing herself in the gorgeous dignity of a hand-made Salish button blanket. Her poetry veers wildly from the calmly lucid, as when she speaks of seeing an old person on the street ("I wonder ... what the heck they looked like when they were children ... when time smiled at you and beckoned and you could hardly wait for the chance") to the bewilderingly extravagant ("Life's full circle does not overwhelm. / Making it look so easy / like a trumpet / in a morning call").

Frazier is one of a growing number of West Coast performance poets who are giving their traditionally cloistered, inaccessible art a new exuberance (and audience) by adding music, lighting, costume and colour. The results often appeal to individuals more attuned to the slap-

dash soundbites of video than to the labour-intensive task of listening to the plainly spoken word. But at its best, performance poetry rekindles the oral tradition, giving a multi-textured richness to language.

A conversation with Frazier is the ideational equivalent of a three-ring circus. She leaps from thought to thought, liberally quotes her poetry, and is prone to sharply funny personal observations. One thing she won't talk about is her childhood ("I grew up in your basic dysfunctional family," she says wryly). She also avoids explicit politics, but she is by no means apolitical.

"I feel a real spiritual support for my work right now," says Frazier, who is Sioux, Blackfoot, and French. "The native community is there, there's a real unity going on ... but the whole idea of being a native performer is not an issue, has never been an issue."

Instead, she is more interested in using current native politics as a metaphor for "the plight of all people when their traditional thoughts are taken away and they're forced to change."

This is a position that's bound to be interpreted in some circles as political equivocation, or artistic compromise. But Frazier doesn't see it that way.

"I think a lot of people want the native thing to be more intellectualized," she says. "They can't see it as a spiritual approach. The native thing is based on the heart and spirit."

"When Elijah Harper was talking, he didn't have to explain why he said no (to the Meech Lake constitutional accord). That didn't have to be his



focus. It was good enough to talk about what led to that moment, instead of talking about the moment."

"The native thing" is something Frazier discovered late. She was adopted, grew up on the West Coast, studied classical piano for 13 years and wanted to be a conductor. She has played in rock bands, worked with elderly people, and spent time around Henry Miller at Big Sur shortly before his death in 1980. Today, a single mother who lives in Deep Cove, she consciously grapples with "the native thing." As well as helping out at the Chief's Mask native bookstore, she has worked with Spirit Song native theatre and performed at City on the Edge, the Vancouver International Writers Festival, Artropolis, the Western Front and the Museum of Anthropology. She is now trying to sell a screenplay she wrote about a resource feud on a reserve as seen through the eyes of a native child, and is working on a piece for the coming Women in View Festival. By all standards it's been a successful year, but Frazier says she's amazed that she actually gets up in front of people and performs her work.

"If you asked me a year ago if I was going to be doing poetry performances I would never have believed it," she says. "For a long time, completion equalled success for me. I'm a single parent, so just the fact I finish anything is a wonderment, and something I feel thankful for. But to take it the next step further is to take it to the point where I can share it with other people, and that's the next phase I'm trying to be at."

Until this year, her experience in front of an audience was either as a band member or reading other people's work. "But what I'm doing now is a completely different approach. It's very

personal. It's very vulnerable because you're not hiding behind anybody else's words."

Modern poets often seem to be nothing more than eccentrics who are good at making art out of the more embarrassing extremes of self-absorption. Frazier, however, doesn't fit this cynical stereotype; she deflects it instead with a mixture of self-effacement and humour.

"I'm saying, do I have enough wis-



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dom and experience to define the creative process? Stein, Miller, Neruda - they weren't defining it. They were discussing it in coffee shops, but they weren't defining it.

"So much contemporary poetry deals with struggle," she adds, a little wistfully. "Me and my friends sometimes joke about poetry before AA, before Adult Children, before all these organizations that tell us, 'nothing is right the way it is, there must be something going on here we're not dealing with.' It's the hidden sabotage. We sabotage our solitude with the word 'dysfunctional.'"

Archer Pechawis, a Metis performer whose specialty is playing the

trickster character of native mythology, has worked with Frazier in her piece "Salutations" and at the Native Cabaret at the 1990 Vancouver International Writers' Festival. "She's really easy to work with," he says. "She's very focused. I think she's got a specific inner vision, but she doesn't dictate it in rehearsal. She does more guiding than directing. It's an organic process; she's really open to collaborative effort."

Native photographer David Neel met Frazier when she consulted with him on the design for her "Salutations" costume. Frazier dedicated "Salutations" to Neel's photographic series, "Our Chiefs and Elders," but there's a strange coincidental twist to their collaboration: she based her hand-painted designs on a totem pole by famed carver Charlie James, not realizing until Neel pointed it out that James is Neel's great-grandfather.

Neel agrees that Frazier works outside an explicit political context. But, he says, that doesn't render it invalid.

"I don't think per se there's a real political message, but, and I understand this from my own work, you put yourself into your

work, and if some of it falls into the realm of politics, so be it. You tell about feelings and concerns you have; some are political, some social, some family ... Annie's got a very different approach, much more personalized. She draws from a number of cultural and artistic areas, but she's using her own heritage as a First Nations person to come up with her work."

But, to the end, Frazier stubbornly resists categorization.

"A lot of people, they want to figure you out. The way we see each other as people, we don't give each other room to be quiet, be still, or say silly things. I find trying to understand each other too intensely just gets complicated." ■