

Janice Perry: Three Sentence Soul Searching

by Stephani Nola

*"I will gladly kill you if
you try to rape me."*

*"Did you know that he's
black and Jewish?"*

*"I've got a wiener.
What have you got?"*

Such were the sound bites slicing through the air at Champlain College's Alumni Auditorium on November 8th. Race, gender, and sexuality boldly took center stage under the guidance of resident artist and Burlington native, Janice Perry. Promptly at 7 p.m. an eager audience began filing in from the crowded lobby and onto the stage.

Audience—on stage? In an unusual mixed-media performance, artists reclined in theater seats while spectators huddled around three televisions spaced out across the stage. Each played a different loop of film created by students and inspired by Perry, a one woman tour de force who has dazzled European audiences with her provocative, socially-charged shows for 25 years.

Perry describes herself as an artist pursuing "ideas that have no obvious goal" as far as she can follow them. "I've had some crazy ideas," she laughed, explaining that once she stopped filtering her impulses, millions flooded through. "It's amazing what came out."

Perry was frank about how she reached that point. "Something cracked." She paused thoughtfully, before adding, "Well, I turned 50!"

Perry's first collaboration with Champlain College was a whirlwind three-day tour, taking her from writing workshops to mass media classes, and even to "the basement, where geeks live." There she pleaded, "Edit this!" and film students obliged with rapid-fire revisions of her footage.

Though she's held numerous residencies, Perry still revels in the power one garners at the helm of a classroom. She entered each room a stranger, giving students just four minutes to respond to this prompt: write three sentences describing the first moment you discovered your identity. Here, identity can be tied to race, sex, religion, disability, or any sense of self.

Perry encountered a wide spectrum of participation, noting that "some sat with arms crossed, but others chased me down the hallway!" Most were candid.

On-stage, the first television zoomed in on a whiteboard as men and women wrote out the identity phrases one by one and voices recited the same lines. It served a purpose: you never knew whether a male or female student con-



Fulbright Scholar and Vermonter Janice Perry, an internationally-acclaimed performance artist.

ceived the line. It proved particularly effective hearing a man say, "I love men," or a woman declare she has "a wiener."

One sobering assertion read, "I was too young to give birth"—understated by the sad face punctuating it on the whiteboard. Another jarring voice confided, "I died in a car accident." This intimacy hints at why a group hug ended one film.

A second television flashed through hand-picked magazine covers and snapshots, all symbolizing sex and gender. Cinematic machismo exuded from blockbusters *James Bond* and *The Terminator*, while a lingerie model boasting a taut body and supple cleavage stressed media pressures for women. A two-page spread highlighting heterosexism featured a conventional cake-topper couple kissing and a headline broadcasting, "I do!" The dichotomy of gender designations was also challenged with a "male" restroom sign.

A third monitor panned around a classroom as students recorded short personal statements ranging from, "I've been discriminated against and I've seen discrimination," to "I am the mass majority."

While "Women's Studies" events find limited audiences, Perry's approach should be lauded for stepping outside the Gender Department and spreading the spark to new spectators. She bills her blurring of boundaries as suitable "for visual and performance artists, philosophers, sociologists, mathematicians, and others."

Perry, a Fulbright Scholar, skillfully turned the spotlight away from herself and onto the students.

Embracing her role as facilitator for the evening, Perry introduced live performances and modestly shooed away the audience's gaze, inviting questions for the young artists.

In "Gender M," Albert Martini confronted social constructions. He lamented that he's expected to "beat my hairy chest, howling... certainly never be gentle, cry, or turn down sex or a fight." He resolved not to perpetuate the problem, declaring, "I'll certainly never set this trap for my sons."

Ginger Vieira furnished a female stance. "Girls don't need to be able to do pushups or triangle pushups. Or these," she added, comically lowering her chest to the floor before pushing her backside up in the air. "I don't know the name for these, I call them military pushups!"

"Girls needn't be strong—a guy can open the pickle jar, drive in a storm, carry a TV to my new apartment. Why should I be strong?"

Despite lacking a remarkably diverse population, panelist Howie Le dubbed Champlain a "pro-diverse community." Organizer Eric Ronis invited Perry in conjunction with Champlain Theatre's ongoing program, Voices of Diversity. Ronis encouraged attendees to reflect on the night's themes, even after exiting the auditorium. "Process. Talk amongst yourselves. Go call your mother!"

Stephani Nola Walton is a Maine-made poet and artist living in Burlington. □

Janice Perry aka Gal will celebrate 25 years of international touring on **December 15th** at the FlynnSpace in Burlington at 7:30 pm. Gal will perform pieces from "Holy Sh*! Stories from Heaven and Hell," and other work, old and new.

Perry began international touring in 1982 with ground-breaking solo performance work. She's been acclaimed by both critics and fans in England, Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Denmark and South Africa, as well as here in the U.S. Perry is a recent Fulbright Scholar and Fulbright Senior Specialist in Performance.

Perry is known for her playful, biting monologues and soaring vocals, powered by social satire and physical comedy. *Holy Sh*!* embraces the birth of Aphrodite, high school shootings, S/M clubs, a "Broadway" musical about every girl's favorite Saint, and a surprising seduction scene between Tonto and the Lone Ranger.

Tickets are available through the Flynn Box Office at 802 863 5966. For more info see www.janiceperry.com

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