

Don't Quit Your Day Job

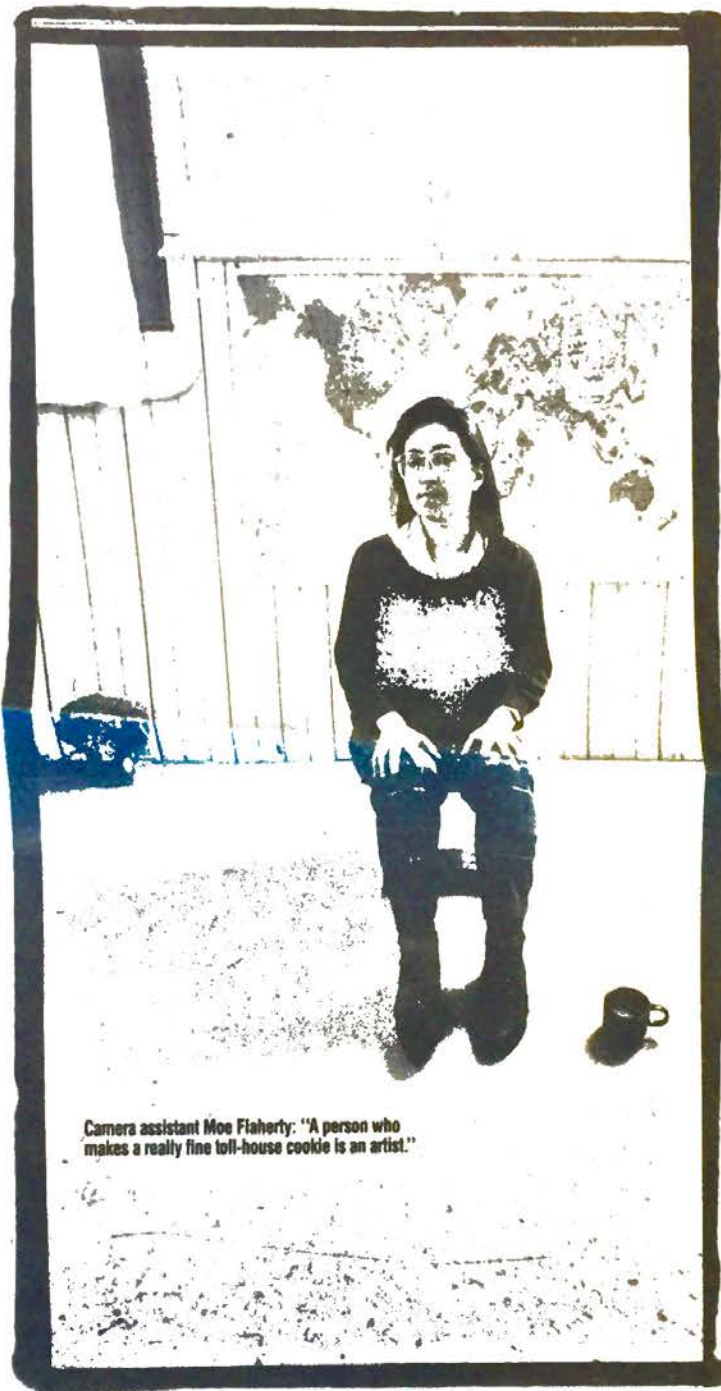
How three perfectly ordinary folks made the leap into the baffling nether world of performance art.

By Judith Lewis

People ask me if I consider myself an artist," says Moe Flaherty, drinking coffee in her definitely artist-like high-beamed living space, a chilly flat crowded into an out-the-way corner of downtown Minneapolis, crammed with remnants of her past and present creations and projects. "Well, if you're going for a definition," she continues, "I'd say that a person who bakes a really fine toll-house cookie is an artist."

Technically, and more specifically, Flaherty works as a camera assistant on locally-produced commercials and film projects, a job that's not without a connection to art, even if the only "art" involved is, as Flaherty claims, getting along with people. But this weekend, she acquires a different set of credentials. She becomes, for want of a better term, a performance artist, joining ranks with 16 other independent performers presenting their works in the Southern Theater/Walker Art Center's *Out There* Late-Night Showcase.

Many of those 16 are, like Flaherty, people with regular day jobs, for whom performing is more than a hobby but not quite a profession. Others, like self-described juggler/comedian/street performer David Walbridge, have managed to turn their performance impulse into a living. But they all share at least one trait: the will to present their work independent of an institution's support or a director's guidance. "It's really interesting," Flaherty remarks, "why all these people perform. It's so personal. Everyone's



Camera assistant Moe Flaherty: "A person who makes a really fine toll-house cookie is an artist."

coming from their own individual area, and we're all self-directed."

Flaherty is something of a renegade where performers are concerned. Her piece, "Variations on a Rhyme," arose when she found herself house-sitting for friends who left her with a video camera and time on her hands. "It was just a matter of, what can I do with this camera?" she recalls. "So I made all these different versions of *Mary Had a Little Lamb* from all these different perspectives. And I was struck by how sad the verse was, this pease porridge hot, pease porridge cold/pease porridge in the pot, nine days

old. I started thinking, 'Where did that come from? Were people actually eating nine-day-old pease porridge?'"

The idea of presenting her concept to an audience occurred when Flaherty saw last year's *Out There* series. "I wasn't very impressed," she says cautiously. "So I said, 'Next year you're going to do this.'"

Until now, Flaherty's performing experience had been limited to reading her fiction at places like Second Wind and Speedboat Gallery, and a few extemporaneous stunts in street theater. (On one occasion, she and a friend set up a psychia-

trist's office on Nicollet Mall and handed out pencils.) "I'm performing because I work a ten-hour day," she admits, "and I hold back a lot of my personality. It's as if I have to do it now, because I'll explode if I don't."

Were it not for places like the Southern to lend their space to independent works, it seems there would be a lot of exploding people around town. Though the Twin Cities, at last unofficial count, boasts some 34 established theater companies, ranging from the experimental to the socially conscious to veritable institutions with national reputations, the local landscape is decidedly short on the kind of places independent artists can spontaneously showcase their work.

Walbridge cites Stevie Ray's Open Stage and other comedy clubs, but he admits that the choice of venues is inadequate. "If an independent artist wants to work," he claims, "they have

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to ride along on somebody else's coattails. There's definitely a need for new spaces."

According to Walbridge, a consistent outlet for independent performers would not only increase their ranks, but improve the quality of the work as well. "One of the problems with working independently is developing your work. If you have an idea that you perform once every three months, you can't hone and polish it. A stand-up comedian doing eight shows a week gets really good, their timing gets to be perfect. Having a regular space makes demands on an artist, and meeting with other artists influences your work and helps you develop."

Bringing performance spaces into being, however, is an energy-consuming proposition. Patrick Scully, a local choreographer, filmmaker and performer, took over St. Stephen's School for a time to host a Saturday-night cabaret.

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Following is a complete listing of *Out There*'s Late Night Showcase performers at the Southern Theater (performances begin nightly after 10:00 p.m.; tickets are \$5.00):

Performing Thursday and Saturday
Ruth MacKenzie's *Hungry*
Gene Larche's *B/W*
Gerry Girouard's *Escher's Dream*
Moe Flaherty's *Variations on a Rhyme*
Christopher Friday and David Lindahl's *Nietzsche on the Bierische*
Aural Hotbed's *Gomi Daiko*
Tess Ransom's *I Love You O Lord*
Patrick Scully's *Too Soon Lost*

Performing Friday and Saturday
Laurie van Wieren's *"Fish" (out of water)*
David Walbridge's *Paper Crane*
Earl Norman's *Why's Y Wise*
Peter O'Gorman's *Seven Objects*
Giles Denmark's *Swimming Lessons*
Lisa Todd's *Lisa's Present*
Steven Zalc Kagan's *Notions*
Julie An O'Baighill and Ruth Hampton's *The Dark Peace*

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Despite help from the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, funds were scarce. "To get in," Flaherty recalls, "you had to bring a chair. But people didn't know you had to leave the chair behind."

Scully's since forged ahead with his own projects, including workshops with a group of "radical fairies," which he describes as "a group of fun-loving, spiritually oriented and mostly gay men who gather together to celebrate our differences." He'll appear in the Late-Night Showcase with "Too Soon Lost," a piece that parallels the razing of Block E, that strip of land between 6th and 7th Streets on Hennepin, with the loss of friends to AIDS. The piece was "born," as he says, "on a cold Saturday night in December," working alone in the spectacularly cavernous white storefront in which he lives.

"It felt like an ice palace in here," he remembers, gesturing around his expansive quarters. "I started looking over this film I had made about a year ago, a time-lapse film of the destruction of Block E. I started feeling really sad and thinking about all the memories I had in those six buildings on that block of Hennepin Avenue, thinking about the time when I had a studio space there. And I realized that it felt very much like the grief I felt over the people who have died of AIDS: friends, acquaintance, friends of friends. "The piece is about grief," Scully explains. "Performing it is an opportunity to express that grief."

Though Scully's primary focus is on creating and performing his own work, he hasn't confined himself to performance artist-status. He auditions for organized projects from time to time, but tries to maintain his emotional distance. "The first few times I did it, it was like an emotional roller coaster," he admits. "Going in, hoping they're going to like what I do, and then the excitement if I'm asked to be in it, and the sense of rejection if I'm not asked to be in it."

"More and more," he continues, "I've come to look at it in a very different way. I was in an audition recently at the Children's Theatre, and it was real helpful for me to look at all those people auditioning and think, well, we're the stuff in the hardware store. And Jon Cranney was the Artistic Director running the audition, and I thought of him as this guy who's got a project in his house that he wants to do, so he's going to walk through the hardware store and decide what he needs for that project."

"If nothing else, I can tell my kids, 'Oh, yeah, I was on stage, in front of an audience.' Then I can tell them, 'Sure, take risks.'"

"So if I'm a Phillips screwdriver and I don't get chosen, it's because he didn't need a Phillips screwdriver. It's not because I'm not a good Phillips screwdriver. I mean, I am *exactly* the Phillips screwdriver that I am. If I'm appropriate for someone else's work then that's great, and if I'm not, then I don't belong there."

Because Scully is tall and bold-featured, appropriate work doesn't come around often. "Some people are more like vise-grips that you can use for all kinds of different things. And some people are more specific to a particular task," Scully believes. Performing independently is an option that, he says, "makes sense." He realizes that "at 6' 8", I'm never going to fit into the corps of the ballet."

Like Flaherty, Scully creates while balancing a full-time, somewhat arts-related job: He coordinates student programs at the Science Museum of Minnesota. "It's the first conventional job I've ever had," says Scully, who has spent the

past 18 of his 36 years with various dance companies and performing groups. "It's a satisfying job, and it ties in—it uses a lot of skills that are very much related to the skills I developed to survive and work in the performing arts. But it doesn't grab me *here*," he admits, pointing toward his solar plexus. "I still consider performing my career."

For David Walbridge, performing actually is a career: By adapting and aggressively promoting his skills, he's created a small business as an independent entertainer. "I book my own shows, and I write everything I use, including my own press releases," he claims. "I do layouts, posters, and I build props. It's a business, but a creative business."

Making a living means taking on such projects as Dr. R.E. Cycle, a Hennepin Parks-created character that encourages schoolchildren to recycle their aluminum cans, a project Walbridge treats with the same respect and commitment he brings to his more serious projects. "I found that if I want to work full-time in theater, I can do it," he says, "but I have to create my own shows, my own venues. A really good actor can get maybe 20 percent of all the shows he auditions for. I still audition, but I don't rely on it for my money."

"It's hard to be a performer economically," Walbridge says, "but it's very challenging artistically. No other job demands that you be creative and attentive and aware continually."

At the Southern, Walbridge will perform in a style he says is unusual for him—something that's not comedy. The piece, called "Paper Crane," "grew out of two things," Walbridge explains. "One was a trip to Japan, and one was my grandmother finding a Japanese sword in her attic. Everything in it is real."

"Ordinarily if you see me, you'd see comedy, juggling, a lot of jokes," Walbridge says. "But eventually as an artist you have to say what's on

your mind."

Like many people who act on their urge to perform, Walbridge has a social agenda behind his performance, and he hopes his work will have some impact, not only on traditional theater, but on the state of the world-at-large. "As a performer you have to believe that you can make a difference," he states, "otherwise there's no point to it."

Scully concurs. "Issues of sexual preference and issues of race are very important to my agenda as a performer," he says. "I would love to live in a world where I felt that as a gay person I had equal access. I would love to live in a state like Minnesota where people grow up and learn about Native American culture as an integral part of their education. I would love to live in a world where people weren't removed from access because of color, and where money wasn't spent on the military. And I think I can make a lot of difference with what I do."

Flaherty is no less inspired, but somewhat less ambitious about the power of her work to influence and audience. "I think it's really great when you write something and give it over to somebody else by performing," she says. "Then it's theirs and they bring their own experience to it. You could analyze what I do, and get something really deep from it, or you could see it simply as variations on a nursery rhyme. However anybody takes it, it's theirs."

And if no one gets anything more from it than ten minutes of fun, performing will still have been worth the risk, according to Flaherty. "If nothing else, I can tell my kids, 'Oh yeah, I was on stage, in front of an audience, performing at one time in my life.' And then I can tell them, Sure, take risks. Climb the Swiss Alps, if that's what you need to do." ■