

Sushi Loses Guiding Light

Tribute to Lynn Schuette

by CHARLES WILMOTH

It will be a sad day at the end of the month when, after 14 years, Lynn Schuette will leave her post as executive director of Sushi Performance and Visual Art. A gifted and accomplished painter, Schuette will be pursuing her art full-time after

these many years of bringing to San Diego some of the most exciting and innovative experimental artists of our time.

Schuette's life as an artist has always informed her choices, from the moment she founded Sushi in a downtown loft in 1980 through the years when Sushi gained a national reputation as one of the country's premiere performance spaces.

Performance

Schuette's perspicacious curatorial choices meant San Diego audiences would have the opportunity to see the likes of Rachel Rosenthal — the *grande dame* of performance — and

Eric Bogasian.

Schuette made Sushi the incubator for the early stand-up work of film star and celebrity Whoopi Goldberg and Guillermo Gomez-Pena, now an inter-

national performance star and a recent recipient of a MacArthur "Genius" grant. And Schuette was the first person on the West Coast who was discerning and brave enough to present the incomparable Karen Finley.

Along side these greats of performance, Schuette introduced San Diego audiences to some of the most thrilling, extraordinary dancers and choreographers of our time: Bebe Miller, Molissa Finley, Steven Potronio, Joe Goode, David Rousseve, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Llory Wilson, Elizabeth Streub and the inexplicable, eccentric Shrimps and Goat Island.

Lynn Schuette



LORNA BERLINER

The entire length of this tribute could be taken up just cataloging all the astounding artists who graced that wonderfully intimate and flexible space downtown on 8th Avenue between "E" and "F" Streets, where performers might take over the street with some socially challenging spectacle, or where crackheads and the homeless were known to disrupt a performance. Indeed, I relish my recollections of being awe-struck, dazzled, puzzled and exalted by the work I witnessed there.

Schuette's consistently superb curatorial achievement was founded on a philosophical understanding that *the margins are central*. And Schuette lived that out organically in programming of inclusiveness based on quality. The impressive preponderance of work by queers, women and people of color was because these disenfranchised sisters and brothers were doing the best work anywhere. And it was work that was engaged with the real issues of our time — gender, sexuality, race, class, poverty and violence — executed with raw and sublime theatrics.

This critically challenging work also exacted a price. Sushi was one of only a half-dozen or so performance spaces that had presented the "NEA Four." So, after the summer of 1990 when Bush's henchman at the National Endowment for the Arts, John Frohnmayer, rescinded grants approved by peer panels to Karen Finley and queers Holly Hughes, Tim Miller and John Fleck, the radical Right's witch hunt resulted in attacks on Schuette personally by the Heritage Foundation and punitive grant cuts by the NEA.

But Schuette persisted and her presentation of work by queers had a way of legitimizing us for the public in San Diego, unlike any other institution. Holly Hughes's brilliant monologues and her masterpiece play *Dress Suits to Hire* (performed brilliantly by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver) about lesbian sexuality, alongside Rosenthal's operatic eco-feminism and questions about consciousness and the border art work by Gomez-Pena, Emily Hicks and Deborah Small meant that all these issues are of equal significance. Tim Miller's queer mythologizing of homosexuality in the age of AIDS was as important as the Los Angeles Poverty Department's illumination of the lives of the homeless.

How could the audiences who saw the work not be moved to greater understanding after experiencing Reno's incisive comic commentary, Richard Elovich's drama drawing together AIDS and the Holocaust, Joe Goode's profound AIDS piece *Remembering the Pool at the Best Western*, Dennis Cooper and Ishmael Houston-Jones's troubling *Undead* about young urban gay male obsession, failure and risk? Or Marty Pottinger's subtle and powerful *Construction Stories* about her life and loves as a butch dyke carpenter, or the brilliant David Cale, Essex Hemphill, Luis Alfaro, John Kelly, Dancenoise and most of those dancers I mentioned, as well as Donald Byrd, Ron Brown and practically everyone at the last three seasons' "Black Choreographers Moving."

My exposure to queer avant-garde art has done more for my self-image as a queer than anything, and has confirmed, by example, that my life is central to the culture, and I have no need to ghettoize, in my mind or in my living, who I am. The work at Sushi often left me crashed upon the shores of my own bigotry and ignorance, and I am a better and bigger person for those painful and confusing encounters. I can hardly imagine a more satisfying and important role in the culture than the gift Lynn Schuette brought to San Diego in changing people's lives.

That task now falls to Vicki Wolf as the new executive director after her many years as managing director. Wolf will continue to need the active support of our community as she brings her own vision to Sushi, and we all wish her well in revitalizing Sushi after funding cuts and the loss of the original Sushi space to re-development.

As for Lynn Schuette, she will now turn her gifts and energies to her own work. And that's an exciting prospect because her last painting show at David Zapf Gallery was really something. Her lusciously colored melding of the body and landscape in "Meridian" was like an enigmatic wedding of Georgia O'Keeffe and Francis Bacon. One can only speculate what complex beauty will issue from her full-time pursuit — no doubt it will be another great gift to the cultural life of San Diego.

Break a leg!