

# Seeing the Bearded Lady as Statement, Not Sideshow

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## A PRIVATE EYE

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"Come look at the freaks! Come gape at the geeks!" "Side Show" was singing at full throttle. In the dark of the audience, I turned surreptitiously to look at my companion, Jennifer Miller. Because she is a woman with a beard — thick, dark, elegantly trimmed — her profile differed from all the faces in the row, all the strangers' eyes and cheeks gleaming red or blue in the changing lights from the stage.

She is an attractive woman in her 30's, with flowing dark hair and bright, slightly heavy-lidded hazel eyes. When, as is her habit sometimes, she leans her head sideways, she looks like some calendar image of Jesus. I had been happy to see her when we met up earlier under the marquee. "I thought there should be a real bearded lady in the house, just to keep them honest," she said, laughing.

Her beard grew in gradually, beginning in her early 20's, when she had already come out as a lesbian. She grew up in Hartford in a family of progressive educators and academics. Her father was a professor of physics at Trinity College. Her parents were Jewish but had turned to Quakerism.

Instead of going to college, she became a clown, soaked herself in Brechtian theory and then joined a circus in California, where she juggled and rode a unicycle. She avoided the bearded lady cliché, with its overtones of passivity and victimization.

These days, as "Zenobia" at the Coney Island sideshow, while juggling machetes and wriggling out of a straitjacket, she points out to her mostly black and Hispanic audiences that many women have the potential to grow beards. Still, as Jennifer Miller, she admits that few women actually do so. She is a gregarious and expressive person whose main job is directing a lively little troupe called Circus Amok, but the beard sometimes speaks for her and goes ahead of her down what can be a lonely path.

She never has the experience of seeing people who look like her in magazines or on billboards. During the intermission of "Side Show" she looked puzzled. "It's like living in the 60's and seeing 'Hair,' or living in the East Village and seeing 'Rent,' she said. "As someone who never saw myself on TV — as a gay person, let alone a bearded woman — it's



Jennifer Miller, who has had a beard since her 20's, is a performer who strives to redefine the conventions of the sideshow's bearded lady.

strange when you see yourself on the Broadway stage."

When the bearded lady (who was played by a man) took the spotlight for a moment in an early scene, the audience laughed. The show-business professional in Ms. Miller was busy finding echoes of Ludlam and Fellini, admiring the actor's backless crinoline and ringleted wig. But a more tender self felt wounded by the laughter. She blushed in the darkness. "It was a drag joke, just a little tranny joke for the people," she said with a shrug. "This is Broadway."

As a feminist, she saw being bearded as simply a possible way of being a woman. She rejected electrolysis as being a form of mutilation; and she didn't like to shave because the shadow was embarrassing. She prefers not to discuss her beard in medical terms, seeing it as personal and political rather than pathological.

She spent many years as a performer fleeing the iconic figure of the bearded lady. She would rather appear with no clothes at all, when

the circumstances feel right to her, than be forced to wear the conventional costume of the the bearded lady.

The sideshow and the exhibition of "human oddities," or freaks, has a rich yet troubling history, from the 19th-century dime museums to the midways and amusement parks in the first decades of the 20th century. It was where Americans found the spectacularly weird before Hollywood and the talk shows. In its heyday it was very big business. But because of the racism that sent freak hunters combing Africa and the Pacific Islands for people they could package as wild men, cannibals, and missing links, Ms. Miller believes the sideshow to have been evil.

Daisy and Violet Hilton, the Siamese twins at the heart of "Side Show," came of age in a community whose aristocrats were midgets and people without arms or legs who earned their living as seal boys or human cannonballs. The twins were exhibited from the age of 3 and, when not on stage, were kept hidden as

"attic children," virtually enslaved, in their childhood. "They would have been tough," said Ms. Miller, who has learned to toughen up herself. "Not so innocent."

The plot of "Side Show," such as it is, revolves around the Hiltons' several ineffectual attempts to find happiness as married women. There was a long tradition of freak marriages, often dreamed up by showmen for publicity. The bearded lady, in particular, was presented as a model of Victorian domesticity and photographed with husband and children.

The Hiltons, who were born in 1908 and were historically the last conjoined twins to be show-biz celebrities, had the example of Chang and Eng, the first, who were born in 1811. The brothers each married, and between them fathered more than 20 children. They died rich, owning slaves and a plantation, but hating each other. The sisters, much to Ms. Miller's satisfaction, were loyal and loving to each other. They died together of influenza in 1967, in poverty.

When, a few seasons back, Ms. Miller agreed to work a summer season at Dick Zigun's revived Coney Island sideshow, she thought of it as entering the belly of the beast. To be sure, Mr. Zigun, a postmodern showman who went to Bennington and later earned a master's of fine arts degree from Yale in Restoration dramaturgy, is a little different from his sometime competitor, Bobby Reynolds, who once played the Palace with a tap-dancing chicken.

Still, Mr. Zigun and Ms. Miller have had their struggles. But his year, she told me as we caught up with each other after the theater over a cup of coffee, her season was fine, in fact, quite transforming.

Mr. Zigun had the money to meet his payroll, and they were a happy little tribe: Christa, the snake enchantress; Frank, the sword swallower and fire eater; and Tony, the dwarf who plays Koko the Killer Klown.

Ms. Miller still feels the absence of her friend Michael Wilson, "The Illustrated Man," who was tattooed on every inch of his body. He died last year. At his memorial, his friends observed that he had simply gotten tired of being stared at. In his company, Ms. Miller said, she felt safe, and completely normal.