

washingtonpost.com

N.Y. Expressionism

On the Streets and in Theaters, Political Protest Is a Multimedia Experience

By David Segal

Washington Post Staff Writer

Thursday, September 2, 2004; Page C01

NEW YORK

In a city ringed by police and overrun by media and trampled by 55,000 grinning Republicans, anything subtler than a bullhorn is bound to be lost in the din. So it's somehow arresting to come across a sound that isn't designed to knock you sidewise -- like the quaint tap-tapping of a vintage manual typewriter here in a patch of downtown park called Foley Square.

Working the keys is a Brooklyn artist named Sheryl Oring, who this Tuesday afternoon looks very much like a secretary, circa 1950. Her auburn hair is in a bun, she's wearing a fitted aqua blue dress with ivory applique flowers on the lapels, and she's taking dictation from a young man wearing a kaffiyeh, who is in the middle of a short rant.

". . . in order to access their oil and dominate the region," he says, slowly, so Oring gets every word. "As a human being . . . I beg of you now . . . support peace and end this violence."

She has been at this for months, in half a dozen cities, inviting passersby to give the president a piece of their minds. More than 660 letters have been composed so far, part of a project she calls "I Wish to Say."

"Sometimes people make a very personal plea having to do with their lives," Oring says during a downtime interview. "A woman in Los Angeles asking for gun control told me about her son, who had been shot and killed. It was very emotional. She started crying. Sometimes it becomes a little bit like therapy."

The protesters have earned the headlines and the crowds, but Manhattan this week is also home to a flotilla of singers, actors, filmmakers, cabaret dancers, playwrights and uncategorizable performers, all of them hoping to turn dissent, or at least the practice of free speech, into art. Or something. It's hard to know what to call the work of a man named Marshall Weber, who read "The Odyssey" and "The Iliad" nonstop while riding the Staten Island Ferry, starting at 6 a.m. Monday and ending 60 hours later. Weber's stated goal was to "evoke a historical context for reconsidering U.S. military policies." Well, we'll see.

An informal tally put the number of events at 200, many organized as the first Imagine Festival of Arts, Issues and Ideas. Inevitably, there is something palpably futile about the whole enterprise. Democrats outnumber Republicans in this town, five to one. Many residents in the 10-mile radius of Madison Square Garden think of George W. Bush as a scary meshugeneh in a cowboy hat, and so only the converted have shown up for any of the preaching. Maybe there was a swing state voter or two in town, but even people from Iowa know to steer clear of New York City in August.

▼ ADVERTISING

THE SOUTH BEACH DIET ONLINE

It's all about the FOOD

DIG IN TO THE SOUTH BEACH DIET

the smart carb diet

No, success in this instance will not be measured by the number of minds changed. Even the festival participants knew better. Many said they felt compelled to perform, even if it wouldn't budge the opinion needle one bit.

"I think the idea is to make you feel part of a community, just to know that there are other people around you who feel the same way," says Emily Levene, a writer and stand-up comic who performed in a show called the "Thalia Follies." During her 10-minute segment of the "Follies," Levene outlined a five-point plan to make politics less strident. Her platform includes the abolition of polls, which she maintains are about as accurate as predicting the future by reading the entrails of animals, an ancient practice. ("Oh, now I'm dating myself," she quipped.) She advised the audience Monday night about how to shrug off a pollster the next time one calls.

"I just interrupt in the middle of the first question and say, 'Hey, you sound *sexy*.' And they hang up on me!"

"I'm tired of this 'either-or' thinking," Levene said later. "It divides everything in two, and one thing must be good and the other thing must be bad."

Levene was one of the calmer voices heard this week. Much of the arts community seems livid and on the verge of Bush-induced madness. At a 19th Street gallery called the Kitchen, a video loop featured Photoshopped images of administration officials in mug shots, as though recently arrested, the images accompanied by real audio tape, framed here as evidence of a high crime. When it was Colin Powell's turn, for instance, his "mug shot" ran with an excerpt of his now-discredited WMD speech to the United Nations. The video ran in a dark room lit only with red lights, adding to the sinister atmosphere.

Some well-known names jumped into this antagonistic fray. Humorist Andy Borowitz and Harper's editor Lewis Lapham hosted a storytelling contest in which audience members were given five minutes to relate their best tales of "agitators, advocates and other big-hearted big mouths." Lou Reed, Moby and Joan Osborne played at the "Stand Up for Choice" show at the Beacon Theater.

There were performances of a new one-act play by Tony Kushner, of "Angels in America" fame. The premise of the work, "Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy," is nearly as unpromising as the title: First lady Laura Bush reads the work of Dostoyevski to an assemblage of Iraqi school children, all of them dead, while an angel watches.

A thoroughly chilling production called "Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom," is at a theater called the Culture Project. The play, which will keep running beyond this week's festival, is told entirely through verbatim transcripts, letters and interviews with Guantanamo detainees and their exasperated relatives and lawyers. All of the first-person narratives in this evening of documentary theater are devastating, with actors playing the roles of real people swept into a U.S.-run, civil-rights-free zone through accidents of fate, prejudice and lousy timing. Sparsely staged and focused on just a handful of prisoners, the show doesn't purport to tell the story of everyone behind bars in the war on terrorism, but it leaves you in no doubt that travesties are underway in the barbed camps of Guantanamo.

That was on the dignified end of the spectrum. On the other end, there was "Fahrenheit 5,6,7,8!," a show by a group of gay, avant-garde dancers with lots of costume changes and plenty of gyrating. The host was a drag king named Murray Hill. And anyone at all could blow off some steam at the Freedom of Expression National Monument, an enormous red megaphone set up in a corner of Foley Square. You needed to ascend a 21-foot ramp to reach the mouthpiece, and once you got there you could shout till you were hoarse.

The megaphone was a small nuisance for Oring and her manual typewriter. She set up her table not 10 feet from the business end of an enormous megaphone mouth and for moments on Tuesday, dictation wasn't possible. There seemed to be a bit of confusion, too, about what she was actually doing.

"It's interesting to see who people think I am," says Oring, who has a part-time job as an archivist at an architectural firm. "I said to a woman the other day, 'If you'd like to, you can leave a contribution,' because I'm funding all this myself. And she said, 'Oh, I already gave to the Republican Party.' "

The reality is that Oring is a registered independent, and she didn't launch "I Wish to Say" with the intent of carpeting the president with negative mail, all of it printed on 6-by-4-inch index cards. She lived in Berlin last year and a friend casually accused the U.S. populace of holding a frighteningly uniform set of political opinions. Oring doubted that and her travels and typing have reinforced her hunch.

About 70 percent of the letters are anti-Bush, she says, and many of his critics are Republicans. She doesn't expect the president will read even one of her hand-made missives, but she has kept a carbon copy of every typed letter, and photos of many of those who dictated them, and plans an exhibition with all this material after the election.

Meanwhile, she's meeting her share of weirdos, like the guy who plopped down in the chair and announced that he'd recently been let out of jail for stalking and was a convicted sex offender. Oring looked at him and realized he wasn't kidding.

"Most people I give my card to," she recalls. "I thought, I'm not giving this guy my name and address."

Mostly, though, she's transcribed sentiments that range from gratitude to scorn. One woman said, with total earnestness, "Thank you for keeping our country safe. P.S. Thank you for the tax break."

On Tuesday, Oring typed up a letter that has so far taken the prize for withering sarcasm. "What a fabulous year it's been," the letter started. "One thousand soldiers dead and, gee, what about all those trees." The closer: "Keep up the great work but if you could limit it to Texas, I'd be really grateful."

© 2004 The Washington Post Company

Advertising Links by Google	What's this?
<p>Republican Singles Join Free, We Match Republicans! A Community of Conservative Singles www.ConservativeMatch.com</p>	
<p>Heinz or W Ketchup? You don't support Democrats. Why should your ketchup? www.wketchup.com</p>	
<p>Support Bush in style politics meets fashion Trendy logos on slim fit t's churchxclothes.com</p>	