

THE AUSTIN

CHRONICLE

SLABBER: Audience With Mystery

By Robert Faires
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She is a figure of mystery. A wanderer referred to only as Our Lady, she appeared in our city and invited anyone who was curious to a private session where she would share her current findings in the ongoing "research" she conducts. But the location of this session was not publicly disclosed, so at a set hour at Hyde Park Theatre, a confidant of hers distributes maps to the location and cassette tapes which are to be listened to on the journey there. On the tapes, a soothing voice describes what Our Lady calls her "condition" but otherwise reveals little concrete about her. At the location, before being ushered into her presence, we're allowed to see Our Lady through a pane of glass; she sits still and alone in a spacious concrete room, her eyes hidden behind sunglasses, her hair covered by a cap, her hands, arms, feet, legs, face, neck -- virtually every square inch of skin extending from under her faux leopard-skin coat -- swathed in strips of plastic. Rather than resolving the riddles surrounding her, this first glimpse of Our Lady only adds to the riddles. Who she is, what her story is, we can but guess.

This was the prelude to SLABBER, a performance piece which made unusual requests of its audiences but rewarded them with an extraordinarily personal theatrical experience: our own audience with mystery. At the heart of SLABBER are questions of identity; Our Lady is engaged in a quest to recover her past, to reclaim a history she cannot recall and through it perhaps "cure" herself of an affliction that troubles her: her inability to reconcile diametrically opposed forces, such as night and day, good and evil, accepted and outcast, faith and doubt, clean and dirty. This last figures most prominently in Our Lady's presentation, as her "research" has led her to the story of a girl who was exiled from her hometown after she ate a delicious passion fruit and, according to her family

and the townspeople, began to "stink," and no amount of soap could cleanse her of the offending smell. Thus, the properties of soap, its chemistry and uses, take on significance for Our Lady and inform her search: She seems to be seeking a psychic emulsifier, a thing that will allow her to mix two concepts that don't usually mix. Where to find such a thing or what it means to belong or how to sift through the artifacts of our lives and find those that hold the secret to our individual identities is a quest we all are on.

But writer/performer Lisa D'Amour and director Katie Pearl reminded us of this in SLABBER with such intimacy that it resonated in a most personal way. The secrecy surrounding the site, the privacy imparted by the individual cassettes listened to in one's car, the closeness with which we were gathered around Our Lady, her quiet manner and the gratitude she expressed to us repeatedly, and the vulnerability she displayed by shedding her protective plastic and exposing her skin to us all generated a profound sense of closeness to the subject and her mission. We may not have known her before that night, may not know her still (at least any better than we know ourselves), but we were brought close to her, as close as a whisper, and came to accept the mystery of Our Lady as we would the confession of an old and cherished friend.