

Sexual Mysticism on

How a near-death experience shaped Blanche Blacke's mission to enhance creativity & explore sexual energy

BY ROBIN BARCUS

It was not difficult to spot Blanche Blacke, singer, performer and modern-day shaman, as she strolled through Lincoln Park to meet me. Her bright blue eyes were ringed with glitter, and her face was painted vivid orange. Her garb was also a bit, ah, unusual for a Thursday afternoon in the park. Clad only in a tiger-stripe bikini, there flowed from her waist an abundance of straw and fabric streamers. Huge chunks of raw citrine encircled her neck like an extra set of teeth. Bands of artificial berries and leaves ringed her arms, and her breasts looked like twin bird nests with berries and foliage attached to her bikini top.

Blanche Blacke is the creator and artistic director of the Shakura Ensemble Ritual Theater (SERT) and her costume was donned for an outdoor photo shoot to support their new production, *Symphony of Sex*.

As Blacke led me blithely through the park, a weathered character on a bench hooted at her. She struck a dramatic pose and fired off some New Guinea-style gibberish at him. He responded with laughter and bird calls. When dressed like a spirit dancer, one might as well live the part.

Blacke's modern day incarnation as a spiritual healer is a far cry from where she found herself a decade ago. After her 16-year marriage broke up, she moved to Los Angeles from Chicago in 1991 to pursue a solo music career. Two years later, an attempt on her life left her nearly dead, and while unconscious in an L.A. hospital, she felt her spirit leave her body and float out of the window.

"I was suddenly out on the trees and yet I felt completely and utterly myself. And I experienced a voice like the birds. The birds said, 'You're not finished. You have work to do that you haven't found yet, and you'll soon meet your teacher.' It felt like there was a rubber band attached to me, and sud-



Blanche Blacke studied shamanism with a Native Ar offers her special "medicine" via intentional theatre

denly I jolted, like an electric shock, and I was back in the body."

She found her teacher as promised, and began a five-year apprenticeship in shamanism with Joy Gardner Gordon, a healer who had lived with Native American Hopi. "She didn't teach me techniques; what she taught me was how to be a shaman. Shamanism is being able to open up like a channel to the spirit world and communicate directly, to get their guidance on what to do... Her greatest gift to me was to teach me how to open and do nothing, until spirit calls."

Back in Chicago in October of '98 she met Bill Close, founder of the "Movement and Sound Sculpture" arts group. During their subsequent collaboration, Blacke coined the term

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ber of 2002. SERT's last performance, "Cycles of Life," was performed to rave reviews at Chicago's Northside College Prep Auditorium in September and December of 2002.

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— Blanche Blacke



Blanche Blacke and dancer Ed Murray perform in "Symphony of Sex."

Blacke's interest was turned toward sexually-themed material when, during a three-week trip to New Guinea in 1996, she spent time with native tribes in the remote Sepik River Basin and learned about their primal sexual rituals. Encouraged by the recent overturning of sodomy laws in the United States, SERT has created a new theater piece called *Symphony of Sex*.

Through ritual, music, dance and video projections, the viewer is taken on a theatrical journey through four "levels" of sexual expression. "Sexuality is energy and it has no morality," she muses. "You can choose either to be base or divine with it."

Symphony of Sex

Opens September 25 at the Theater Building, 1225 N. Belmont in Chicago and runs through October 5. Tickets can be purchased at the box office, 773-327-5252 or Ticketmaster, 312-902-1500. For more information, visit www.shakuraworld.org.

The sexuality framed in *Symphony of Sex* is inspired by New Guinea's "devouring" sexual practices, modern-day compulsive desire, the divine sensuality of Aphrodite, and the ultimate union of spirits in the ancient sexual play of the Bon Po, a Tibetan spiritual practice predating Buddhism. "This work is meant to enlighten people about the various levels of sexual energy," Blacke explains, "and give them the vicarious experience — and to be entertained as well." CC

Robin Barcus is Chicago-based writer and multidisciplinary artist.