

Shamanic rituals energize 'Symphony of Sex'

Blanche Blacke co-founded a local rock band (Phil 'n' the Blanks) in the 1980s and wrote a novel (*The Ruby Tears*) in the early '90s, but it wasn't until after surviving a near-death experience that she found her true calling — spiritual healer and modern shaman.

"The angels talked to me and told me the truth," said Blacke, about the inspiration for this unusual career path. "Then I met a shaman and she pretty much told me I had the gift of healing. Like a writer or a singer or a dancer might have a gift. A priest knows religion and a shaman knows spirits."

While her forte became healing of the psychological, spiritual and sometimes even physical ailments of her clients, Blacke moved back into the performing arts in 1998 after she was asked by Bill Close to perform with his company, MASS Ensemble. Close was entranced by her chants and incorporated them into one of his performances.

By 2000, Blacke had founded Shakura Ensemble Ritual Theatre, an avant-garde performance troupe that brings the ancient art of shamanic ritual theater into the 21st century. The company's latest work, "Symphony of Sex," explores the energies of human sexuality and the myths surrounding it, according to Blacke.

"We are addressing sexual energy through the shamanic aspect of what I do in my work," said Blacke. "The essence of the piece is drawn from different levels of sexual energy."

"Symphony of Sex" explores the



Blanche Blacke (from left), Michael McEvoy and Ed Murray are in the cast of "Symphony of Sex," presented by the Shakura Ensemble Ritual Theatre at the Theatre Building Chicago.

primal, vital, magical mystery tour that is human sexuality. Blacke has created dramatized versions of rituals she experienced on trips to New Guinea and others researched in her studies about ancient Greece, inspired by the poets Apuleius, Euripides and Homer, as well as the ancient manuscript "A Dkar Theg Pa (The Way of Pure Sound)" from the Tibetan Bon Po.

A previous work, "The Cycles of Life," explored the Navajo shamanic traditions. A future goal of the company is to invite members of indigenous cultures to take part in the performances.

Blacke and her troupe move

beyond the basic inspiration of ancient rituals by integrating live music, dance, video, dramatic scenes and chanting alongside the myths and traditions of world cultures.

"The productions are designed for entertainment," said Blacke. "Audiences will have an enlightening, educational and entertaining experience. 'Symphony of Sex' presents the idea that sex isn't simply one thing, one idea, but something that has many different aspects emanating from many cultures."

"Symphony of Sex" opens Thursday and continues through Oct. 5 at Theatre Building Chicago, 1225 W. Belmont. For tickets (\$27) call (773) 327-5252.