Wild Kingdom

NEA bugaboo Ron Athey’s sophisticated savagery holds a mirror to America. Too bad if America can’t stand its reflection

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Vermont Avenue is crawling with clones. Young men with their heads shaved bald, liberally tattooed and strategically pierced: Studs jut out from beneath lower lips, rings hang from noses and eyebrows, steel nipple rings protrude through ribbed cotton undershirts. They wear short-shorts and high black boots and as much leather as their bodies can stand in the late-summer heat. Ron Athey and I are winding through them and around them on our way to Fred’s 62, the latest of the impossibly stylish bleeding-edge diners to be installed in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Los Feliz. In neatly belted khakis and a long-sleeved, green-and-black-striped polyester rugby shirt, Athey looks more the upscale raver than the local ambassador for the BDSM (bondage/domination sadomasochist) society, as one acquaintance described him to me at a party back in the early ’90s. With his body tatts hidden, only minor points of evidence blow his cover: A plug inserted in the hole beneath his lower lip and his trademark ink, a spider splaying across his forehead. The link between the original and his clones is slight. But Athey is an icon on this block. The image will never change, even if the real self has.

“Ronnie,” I point out as we pass a ravey little Los Feliz clothing store where a clone works the sales floor, “look at all the boys who want to look like you!” He tosses off a laugh and shakes his head. “I know,” he says without resentment or arrogance. “Like me five years ago.”

Five years ago, in Los Angeles time, seems a quarter of a century back. Riots and fires and earthquakes have altered the landscape and the spirit of the city; crime has soared and then waned. The live music scene has been supplanted by techno; nightclubs have turned into dance clubs. Performance as an art form, unless you count a reading or two at one of the Borders Bookstores that paper this town, has simply ceased to exist. And for the last four of those five years, Ron Athey has not performed a finished work in the city he calls home.

That’s in part because Athey’s legendary theater pieces, which he describes as “a showcase of body manipulation,” made him the emblem of a 1993 campaign against the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) led by then California Rep. Robert Dornan. Instead of conferring permanent notoriety, the controversy gave him a brief glimmer of national infamy followed by years of de facto exile. “I have effectively been silenced in this country,” Athey maintains. “No one is going to risk the little bit of funding they have left to produce what I do.”

Which is all the more unfortunate because Athey has, in the past five years, evolved as both writer and artist. If those of us who've followed his work don't get to see that in the performances themselves, we can at least hear it in the precision with which he is now able to describe what he does. According to Athey's close collaborator of the last three years, composer and violinist Julie Fowells, Athey has grown adept at communicating his vision and bringing other people on board. "In the beginning, he told me absolutely nothing," Fowells recalls. "For the first few tours, I'd go out there with a basic idea of what he was going to do on-stage, and that was it-Ron wasn't able to articulate what he was doing all that well to begin with, and he certainly wasn't able to articulate it musically because he's not a musician." But if working with people like Fowells and London-based musician/producer Dave Harrow has developed in Athey the ability to sort the contents of his head into complete sentences, it has also discernibly enriched the intellectual process and philosophical thought that go into creating his art. In terms of style, he's left the clones far behind; in terms of performance, Ron Athey has outgrown the very scene that once nurtured his work.

Athey found his first audience as a renegade spectacle in nightclubs, developing his ritualistic variety acts in places such as Club Fuck! and Sin-a-matic. He stripped, he pierced himself, he tied up his friends, he created whimsical hardcore social critiques: One idea he had was to fill a woman's rubber panties with butter and have a "nurse" with a vacuum cleaner suction out the fat.

Nightclubs were potent playgrounds for experimentation, but not the route to artistic longevity. ("If you think theater is ephemeral," says Athey, looking back, "nightclubs are gossip.") In 1992, author Dennis Cooper asked him to draw up a proposal for a theater piece to be presented at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). Athey wrote an outline for a performance entitled *Martyrs and Saints*; it included scenes in which mock patients on gurneys were wrapped from head to toe in duct tape and administered an onstage enema. The piece ended with Ron being adorned with a crown of thorns made from needles sewn through his scalp.

That it's hard to envision a performance committee approving such a proposal today proves just how long those five years have been. The performance, at LACE's austere old space buried deep in downtown LA, was oversold to the point where people were sitting on the stairs and lined up along the back of the house. Those who weren't already standing in the beginning were standing by the end, and Athey's career as a legitimate, art-house performance artist began in earnest. But the Los Angeles performance scene was already on its last legs. The next year, LACE moved into a touristy Hollywood storefront and left its artistic guts behind. Highways, the venue that fostered the development of Tim Miller and introduced Guillermo Gomez Pena, withered with the departure of its founders and virtually died in the national battle to dismember the NEA. The Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) never did have the stomach for even the most artistically meritorious sodomy scene; there is not much hope of its performance curator, Julie Lazar (whom Athey and crowd have renamed "Truly Bizarre"), sponsoring BDSM-based performance rituals, however spiritually meaningful, in MoCA's well-heeled halls.

Yet while the LA performance scene languishes in conservatism, the rest of the world is enjoying the hell out of Ron Athey. Since the summer of 1994, when he was invited to perform *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, Athey has been a mostly

European phenomenon; a paid, productive and provocative contribution at the edges of the Continental art world. His latest work, *Deliverance*, was commissioned by ICA's Live Arts Department, the first commission of a non-UK resident in the institute's history. Along with his seven-member cast and crew, Athey has performed the work in Amsterdam, Brussels, Hamburg, Bordeaux, Zagreb, Ljubljana, Mexico City and, most recently, at Inteatro XX, the 20th-annual festival of new theater in Polverigi, Italy. The response from the press and public has been passionate and intense, and often much more personal than anything the company encounters in the United States. "They don't even have a gay bar in Zagreb," Athey says. "But 80-year-old men come up to me with tears in their eyes, telling me how much the burial scene reminded them of burying their friends in the Balkan War."

"People in the U.S. think they live in the most liberal country in terms of art," Athey continues, "but they're wrong." The only time Athey made it to prime-time news in this country was when someone in Minneapolis lodged a complaint with the city that he was spraying HIV-tained blood at the audience in a performance at Walker Art Center. For the record, he wasn't spraying anyone's blood at the audience, but he was making blood prints from a carving in a cast member's back and clothes-pinning them to a line that moved on a pulley system over the audience's heads. Dornan used the distorted information to famously attack Athey's funding, a scant $150 of which, in a long trickledown process from Walker's performance department, might have come from the NEA. Compare that to life and art in Mexico City, where "the local news show featured a ten-minute excerpt from *Deliverance*, with only positive, straightforward commentary," according to Athey. "I was in a taxicab coming back from the Pyramid of the Sun and Moon, and the driver had his little TV in the car. The news came on, and he said 'Hey, that's you!'"

"Zagreb already blew up and Mexico's about ready, too," Athey says. "Their cultures are so much more extreme."

It is Wednesday night in early spring, and a line was formed around the corner at Hollywood and Ivar in anticipation of Ron Athey's 10 pm appearance at Mogul's, a bar tucked behind the new LACE. When I scan the crowd and recognize faces I haven't seen in years—Ron's regular following and a handful of familiar imitators—I realize just how long it's been since I've seen Ron perform. But there's a younger crowd here, too: Art school kids who've seen the film version of *Martyrs and Saints*; students who heard in a college class on censorship about what happened to *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* when NEA funding got involved. Wherever the audience comes from, by the time the bar upons up and the crowd squeezes in, there isn't an empty spot left on the floor.

We sit cross-legged among round miniature stages of the sort go-go dancers occupied in the late '60s. Beer bottles and drinks line the stages' peripheries; there are so many that I start to worry about someone getting hurt. Fowells' violin begins making eerie, haunting noises; the lights come up on Darryl Carlton—the man whose back Athey once cut tribal patterns into—posing as Buddha. Two muscular women, Crystal Cross and Pigpen, both bare-breasted, both in buzzcuts and the latter sporting trademark facial hair, dump bags of Supersoil on the large stage beneath the Buddha before pulling a third woman, a sinewy dancer named Theresa Sasso who doubles as Athey's choreographer, into the piles of dirt. Athey and two other men wrapped in tape begin to

circle her. We watch her dance in visceral, undulating movements as Athey's voice comes over the speakers:

At first I was a sensible man, I was medicated, infused, but my fall to idiopathic thrombocytopenia was cause to have my spleen removed. I am feeble, full of shame, and my mantras are cynical. But here, could I have ever imagined such a beautiful place to die? Could I ever have imagined such a beautiful place?

I know Ron Athey pretty well, I guess. I've known him for six years, since the day I started work as arts editor of the *L.A. Weekly* where Athey was and still is assistant to the editor, and I am now a staff writer. I suspect that I know that these words mean more than most in this audience. I helped him write that first proposal to LACE. I forced him to comfort me through treacherous breakups. I assigned and edited his first book reviews and art pieces. (There was only one I didn't like, and instead of telling him I tried to "lose" it. Ron wrote me the nastiest letter I have ever received from a writer. I walked downstairs to his desk and apologized. As far as I know he forgave me.) I visited him at Midway Hospital when he had his spleen removed, and by some weird synchronistic intersection of lives, my West LA neighbor, an Orthodox Jew before she met Ron, happened to be one of his doctors. While tending to Ron, she promptly fell in love with one his bustiered-and-inked lesbian companions and celebrated her first Christmas in their new house the next year.

So we have, you could say, some history. If not a great deal of common ground; in some ways, I'm as far from Ron Athey as another white person can be. But if we get each other at all, it's on two fronts: Love and God. As a fellow black sheep and conflicted atheist, I understand what he means about those cynical mantras. He was born an Army brat in Groton, Connecticut in 1961, but Athey grew up in the bleak Los Angeles ex-urb of Pomona, surrounded by passionately weird Pentecostal women who flooded him with guilt and shame and an unshakable spirituality. Which doesn't mean he believes in God, but it doesn't mean he doesn't, either. "The whole concept of *Deliverance* started with an empty feeling about dying and coming out of having AIDS: What is the definition of healing? What philosophical questions can I ask about death if I say I don't believe in God?

"The identity I had as an atheist was highly contradictory to my spirituality, and it isn't really true anymore," Athey says.

"So how has it changed?" I ask.

"Oh, it hasn't."

"So what has?"

"Nothing. I'm still an atheist."

As of my own beliefs, I say I believe in nothing but life itself, and yet on this quest to heal the body I've drank the water from Lourdes, I've eaten the dirt and I've been rubbed in dirt from New Mexico. I've been prayed over and had those hands lain upon me.

I seek your guidance. Deliver me, deliver me.

A statuesque African-American drag queen takes the stage dressed in blond wig and stiletto heels, her scrotum stapled around her penis to mimic a vulva. As she bumps and grinds, Pigpen and Cross taunt her and slap her around, she begins to falter, staggering as if she's drunk or about to faint. They spin her until she stumbles, and finally reach toward her anus, where they pull out a four-foot-long string of pearls.

Deliverance is not for the squeamish.

Or maybe it is. I remember calling Ron in the middle of the afternoon, after hearing reports of women who fainted and vomited during *Martyrs and Saints*, which he was then performing at Highways. "I don't think I can take it," I told him. "I'm feeling too fragile right now." There was a silence on the end of the phone before he argued. "It's not that dark," Ron insisted. "And I put you in the acknowledgements for helping me with my writing."

So I had to go, and did, and he was right. The performance was as full of beauty as pain; there were scenes of renewal and celebrations of blood. I left feeling—it sounds trite, but its true—healed. And whole, and happy. And amazed at the power of my friend's imagination.

At Moguls, Ron performed only an hour of the four-hour *Deliverance*. It felt too short, and it was. But I left this time feeling amazed at how sophisticated Athey's stagings had become. How Dave Harrow's soundtrack lent the production a slickness he didn't have in those days at LACE; how Fowells' violin made the scenes more haunting than the disco of years past (although it's not foolproof: In one Zagreb performance, the tape broke and Athey had to splice in Donna Summer to accompany his parody of Rod and Bob Jackson-Paris' marriage). And I left realizing how, in those days at Highways, I never had to ask for a backstage pass. After a performance, Athey would remain on the stage, drying his sweat and often literally streaming with blood. You couldn't touch him, but you could tell him face to face how moved you were. At Moguls, security guards protected the performers from their many admirers, and I no longer had credentials of close personal friendship to get past them.

I didn't see Ron for a month. When I did, it was because he came back to work at the *L.A. Weekly* for a day or two before his trip to Croatia.

"I liked your show," I said.

"Thanks."

"It's longer than that, right?"

"Yeah."

"I'd like to see the whole thing," I said.

“Well, you will probably have to go to Europe. No one’s going to do it here.”

The manager of Moguls, a man who had professed great love of the arts and desire to support edgy performance in his bar, had informed Ron that, despite that wall-to-wall crowd and stacks of beer bottles, he had not, in fact, made his bar minimum. Ron paid him several hundred dollars out of his own pocket. And then he was off to Europe again, to make a decent wage.

“I feel like I’m in the wrong place,” Ron tells me over waffles at Fred’s. He’s speaking of Los Angeles, but also America, and I’m surprised to hear it. I’d always assumed that the Dornan fiasco, which made him a temporary symbol of demonic decadence in art, had earned him some measure of fame. It hadn’t. I’d learned that Karen Finley recommended him for a show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and figured maybe he’d come to know her when he turned to her for consolation, as he might have done with other targeted artists—John Fleck, Tim Miller, Holly Hughes—in those weeks he spent under congressional attack.

He hadn’t. “I spoke at a National Performance Network conference a year after it happened,” Athey recalls, "and people were asking me there if I’d gotten any support. I told them that I called Karen Finley, and she said ’I have a baby in one hand and a hammer in the other, I haven’t got any time to talk to you.’ No, I got no support. I don’t think John Fleck even wanted to talk about it.

“Truly bizarre was furious with me and demanded that I make a public apology. But I didn’t—it was just the truth. I didn’t blame any of them; it’s just the way things have changed.”

Even before they changed, though, Athey was a hard artist to defend—at least on paper—even for other artists. Finley may have been playing around with yams, but Athey pulls a string of hankies out of his anus. Not even Europe, for all the financial support he receives from the arts community there, can handle it all. The staff at the Eurokaz Festival in Zagreb, Croatia had so little education about HIV they wouldn’t come near any of the company members, which meant the performers set up the production’s extensive set themselves. Athey’s name has been left out of the award letters for certain grants, which are assumed to include him even as they address only his collaborators. The Zagreb daily newspaper ran a commentary on *Deliverance* that bore the headline “The Pornographic Swindle,” in which a writer suggested that the director be burned at the stake.

“My work is expensive and it’s going to cause trouble,” Athey sums up over lunch. “There are things I do that are illegal here and in some other countries. If I did a long run here I’d be in trouble; if I did a long run in Croatia, I’d probably be in jail. We’ve talked, the whole cast, about how everyone’s willing to take that risk. We all know we could get deported at the end of the night.”

But the interest, and the touring, continue; Athey shows me a fax from the Munich Siemens Cultural Center citing his “striking performances” and requesting his inclusion in a video program on body art. It’s a different life, a more sophisticated, worldly existence. He started smoking in Europe, finally went on a protease cocktail last month. And producer/director Catherine Saalfield (*Keep Your Laws Off My Body*) recently released *Hallelujah*!, a backstage-and-bedroom

documentary about him. (The title comes from a statement of Ron's about his spiritual journey from a Pentecostal childhood spent self-flagellating and blood-letting on stage: "There are many ways to say hallelujah!")

The day I finished this story, I saw him in the *Weekly*'s parking lot dressed all in navy blue linen. "You look...dapper," I said, as if it were unusual. I realized as I walked away that I was judging the real man against the icon. It's been a few years now since Ron took on dapper as a daily look.

"I saw my old boyfriend the other day," Ron says of Rozz Williams, the Goth rock musician, formerly of the band Christian Deth, with whom Ron performed in the early '80s. "And he looks exactly the same as he did ten years ago! After he left, I took down all the Goth stuff and started redecorating my apartment." The doctor is still spare, but you can already sense the evolution. In one corner stands a single high leather boot. "It's a fake leg," Ron says. "I bought it at a thrift store. In Slovenia."

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