



For the week of February 20 26, 2003

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## THEATER REVIEW - Cleverly conceived 'Queer' forces viewer to re-examine ideas

**PAM KRAGEN**  
Staff Writer

Through the creative use of cellophane, chairs, words, sound and movement, the team behind "(Un)Defining Queer Reborn: Body & Soul" at Palomar College asks the viewer to question his or her own ideas on gender, labeling and the wounds that words can inflict in this life and beyond.

A theatrical collaboration between Palomar drama Professor Michael A. Mufson and nine students ---- Sandy Renee, Stella Dacy, Fallon Forte, Tori Johnson, Valerie Lo, Sheena Loren, James Soto, Anna Tower and John E. Walker ---- "(Un)Defining Queer Reborn" is layered with so many ideas that not all of them can be easily taken in in one sitting. But even on the most superficial level, any viewer will be moved by this thought-provoking piece.

In "(Un)Defining Queer," the audience steps into a netherworld in which the souls of troubled people (who struggled with sexual identity in a past life) are in the process of being reborn. But even in their new lives, these souls will face the same battle between their instincts and societal expectations.

Symphonically structured in five movements, "Queer" opens with six souls reliving the pain of their past lives as well as their deaths (a lesbian is beaten to death in a gay-bashing, a transvestite slowly drinks himself to death, etc.). Then, coiled in fetal positions in unisex underwear, these souls await rebirth by the dual deities Frey and Freya (Freya was the Norse goddess of youth). These deities (part jokester/part facilitator) randomly assign gender to the souls with colored strips of cellophane (blue for male, pink for female, green for ambiguous/bisexual)

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### "(Un)Defining Queer Reborn: Body & Soul"

**When:** 8 p.m. Feb. 21-22; 2 p.m. Feb. 23

**Where:** Performance Lab D-10, Palomar College, 1140 W. Mission Road, San Marcos

**Tickets:** \$10, general; \$8, seniors; \$6,

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and the souls are reborn in a creative "breakthrough" scene.

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The rest of the show is devoted to the maturation of these six people from infancy to puberty and into the experimental teen years. Each tries on different identities (pot-smoker, weightlifter, bookworm) before finding his or her own natural fit. Then, as adulthood and parenthood looms, they struggle once again with gender roles and self-identity. Some repeat the same cycles, some (by virtue of gender reassignment or trial and error) find new roads. Ultimately, each arrives at contentment.

The show isn't just about sexual identity, though. It also tackles the stereotypes associated with gender (male as breadwinner, female as nurturer). And in an African tribal dance scene, it celebrates the inner female in us all.

It also asks the viewers in a brilliant way to reject the labels that people use to define ourselves and others. At one point, audience members are invited to select a chair to sit in. Each chair is marked with a label, from the innocuous ("vegan," "teacher," "animal lover") to the offensive ("pimp," "faggot"). Interestingly on opening night, audience members gravitated to the chairs with the less harsh labels. Left empty were chairs marked "useless alcoholic" and "bitchy queer," among others.

A few elements of "(Un)Defining Queer" could still use some work. The action drags near the end when a scene on partnering and parenting is repeated three times for no apparent reason. The deities Frey and Freya (who become mute spiritual guides after the birth scene) seem somewhat underwritten, offering comic relief and gender assignment but not much in the way of self-identity, personal history or motivation. And while femininity is celebrated, masculinity is not.

The show features art direction by Valerie Lo and lighting design by Jennifer McInnes-Williamson and Christiana Fiocco. An eclectic musical score includes a pulsing womb soundscape by Mufson and compositions by Camille Saint-Saens and John Cage, as well as Palomar music professor Madelyn Byrn.

The 75-minute performance art-style piece is similar in style to Mufson's last collaborative theater piece, "Wireless City," a futuristic Orwellian nightmare in which audience members interacted with anarchists bent on destroying their impersonal computer-controlled world. But where "Wireless City" was an

almost overwhelming orgy of sights and sounds, "(Un)Defining Queer" is minimalist in design, stripped down to essentials, more structured and more inviting for the audience. With the most basic of props (mirrors, window and door frames and cellophane), the message comes through the greater clarity and simplicity.

For a show that deals with sexual identity, "(Un)Defining Queer" isn't particularly racy. While there is some same-sex kissing and language, it's less shocking that what most teens see on MTV every day. And unlike MTV, this show doesn't reinforce harmful stereotypes and is both educational and enlightening.

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