This book explores the tangible body blows—ones taken and ones given—of my life and times as explored through my performances. The lights come up bright on stage and we find ourselves right in the middle of some kind of queer boxing ring. The blows come fast and furious. The gay-bashers’ blows. The sweet blowing breath of a lover tickling over my eyes. The blows on my shoulders and head from a cop in Houston or San Francisco during an ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) protest. The stubborn butting my head against the homophobic crap that gets dumped in my path. The below-the-belt blow of HIV-AIDS that almost had us on the ropes. The exquisite, soft touch of two men’s bodies coming together in loving sex. I hope my shows are full of the put-up-your-dukes and stand-your-ground feistiness of such day to day blows—given and received—that are a part of being gay in America. I raise my voice as a performer to honor these Slings and Eros of our outrageous queer fortune!
In my twenty years of work as a performer and writer I have tried to tell a few such stories that chart the emotional, spiritual, sexual, and political topography of my identity as a gay man. Okay, I admit it, all this highfalutin’ stuff as well as wanting to divulge some juicy autobiographical tidbits from my love life! I have assayed this gnarly chore by whatever theatrical means necessary: garrulous ranting, bittersweet two-hanky narrative, correspondence school tap-dancing, cheerful nudity, poetic mapping, and socially transforming soap-box standing! Whatever the creative avenue, this commitment to trying to articulate a queer life has been at the center of my work as a performing artist since 1980, when I did my earliest performances in New York City at Performance Space 122 at the age of twenty-one and organized the first gay men’s performance art festival in the United States.

I believe my mission as an artist and a gay man is to give witness to this challenging time, to live out loud and give that voice to my community, and to throw down a big bejeweled Liberace gauntlet to our backward society.

One of the things I think theater can do quite well is to gather communities into over-heated rooms in order to shine a light on systems of prejudice that are just so damn unfair. The sweaty reality of live performing has been a great place for me to cast my personal creative high beams on the tasty pleasures and nasty injustices that queer folk face. I feel lucky that I get to gather with people in cities all over the country to raise awareness, encourage activism, stir the dating pool, and test-drive strategies for lesbian and gay equality. The right-this-instant heat of live performing is an especially handy cattle prod to encourage people to get behind that steering wheel and hit the road. I believe the empathy and openness that come through the seductive strategies of performance—compelling narrativity, the performer’s charisma (if it’s a good hair day!), the group dynamic with a live audience, and so on—create the ideal lab conditions for conversion, for channeling the audience’s psychic and political energies
toward claiming inner and outer transformation. I think theater is primarily a big mirror that can be held up to the community. In that reflection we can see a set of potential roadmaps to new sites where liberation stories yet-to-be-told can flourish.

The performances included in this volume explore all kinds of kiss-and-tell joys and sorrows of this gay boy’s life. I hope my work creates spaces for savoring the humor and humanity of queer identity in America as well as confronting the grim, parallel reality of the array of U.S. human rights violations against lesbian and gay people. As I follow the bread crumbs trying to get out of that
damn forest and away from the witch’s glowing oven, is it just me or does that witch look strangely like Jesse Helms? Hmm, could just be a lighting problem.

I’m Not Alone

Though almost all of the performing I do is solo, I feel like I am never really alone on stage or in the theater. Sure, in the theoretical sense, my solo performances exist in relation to my sense of community and the times we inhabit, but this feeling of not being alone is much more human-scaled than that abstract notion. I see each individual performance’s audience as my creative partners, as companions of the night’s revels and co-creators of the night’s revelations. My performances are a real-time encounter with the acknowledged presence of the folks seeing the show. I’m talking to them specifically.

The encounter starts before the show does. Audience members often get greeted by me as they arrive at the theater or performance space. I do this to reduce the performer-spectator divide, natch, but also because I just happen to like hanging out in the theater lobby before the show. Let’s face it, there’s always more action in the lobby than in my dressing room backstage. Plus sometimes there’s no bathroom back there and you have to piss in a tennis ball can or in the vase filled with rancid water from last week’s production of Ain’t Misbehavin’. It’s a glamorous life on the road! At least in the lobby I get to pee with the grown-ups in the clean toilets before I go onstage.

The partnering with the audience doesn’t stop there, of course. Like a sweaty tent-revival preacher, I tend to press the flesh during my shows and to get pressed back—sometimes even pinched on the butt if the audience is frisky on a Saturday night in St. Louis! I hope reading the scripts of the performances will suggest the immediacy of the interactions between me and the audience. The spectators have all kinds of different relations with
me. They tattoo me, scrub cake off my face, give me the Heimlich maneuver, wash my naked body, let me read their palms, pull me around by ropes, shout out “pussy” and “asshole,” and eat oranges from my hand in a fruity communion. In My Queer Body I wander naked among the rows and finally end up sweaty on one person’s lap, eye to eye as we try to find our way out of hell. The collaborative ritual of the evening is completed in my extended hangout with the audience after the show. A quick swig of water in the wings and I immediately head back to the lobby and meet, commiserate, give and receive advice, hug, sign books, and in my saucy days on the road before I was a married man, swap phone numbers! All of these exchanges are a chance to rehearse, to try out, some of the possibilities I propose in my shows.

Just as I never feel like I am alone out there on the mostly bare stage, I never feel like the performance space is empty either. Though I usually have only one or two props, this is not just me wanting to create “poor” theater in a Grotowskian sense. Sure, some of it is determined by my lean-and-mean budget constraints since I get no government funding for my performances. Anything that’s going to go with me on the road has to fit in one carry-on bag with my clothes; otherwise it’s too much expense or bother and isn’t going to end up in the show. The truth is I prefer to allow the quicksilver imagination of the audience to work with me and make things appear and disappear with the minimum of fuss, muss, and shipping fees. My performance landscape is just me and a dangling orange on a string, a seedpod from Walt Whitman’s grave, a piece of lava from a volcano, a circle of some dirt from outside the stage door, or some pasted-together maps from my old National Geographics. Occasionally I need a footlocker, a stool, a milk crate, or a piece of rope, all items that can readily be found stashed somewhere in most performance spaces or theaters.

In spite of the spare formality of these spaces I create, I actually feel the lushness of the world there in the performing arena. The handful of dirt is my backyard garden, the maps become my
gorgeous cosmological backdrop, the seed or orange becomes the fertile garden, the Edenic possibility that recurs again and again in my work. My stage space needs to be blank enough so it can serve as a surface on which the audience and I can imagine new social relations.

On my performance itinerary are frequent visits to authoritarian public buildings and symbols of government. A show might feature a demonstration at a county hospital, a glimpse of queer empowerment at the San Francisco City Hall, the harsh, chipped Formica corner of an INS official desk, or a future inaugural gala at the Kennedy Center in D.C. for the first black lesbian president of the United States. The wish fulfillment inherent in creatively fucking with these power-of-the-state architectures is consistent with my desire to encourage, to imagine, a kind of a psychological inner theater where we redesign more equitable social spaces for human beings to occupy. I don’t want to commit energy to creating a theatrical set of the Supreme Court, I want the audience to help in changing the actual Supreme Court. My “set” or “properties” are ultimately going to need to be continually co-created by the people who see my shows once the performance is over. In a way, we all become stage hands to make this happen. Between interacting with the performer and giving their utopian thinking a workout, audiences have already had some practice imagining, rehearsing even, the potential for social, emotional, and sexual transformation. Hopefully they are also then more prepared to keep that work going a bit as they head back out into the world.

Body! Sex! Self!

Theater is a chance for people to be in a dark room with a bunch of other sweaty bodies and see what might happen. If it’s a good night, they should want to get laid or storm the barricades or shout mystic visions from whatever rooftops they might have
handy. One of my biggest chores is to offer a menu of a new relationship to our bodies and sexuality. Some of my strategies to make this happen are frank and poetic sex talk, images of orgies bringing down the federal government, and of course the naked body barging onto the stage.

I hope my performances offer audience members, both straight and gay, an opportunity to renegotiate their relationships to their bodies through the performer’s embodiment and the slinky tales I weave. This process is nothing new. I think the theater has always been a place where the presence of the body is allowed. I’m sure those audiences in the fourth century B.C. were looking forward to checking out the fresh meat and seeing the new crop of cute chorus boys at one of Euripides’ opening nights. This is probably part of the reason why nudity onstage is such a staple of edgy new performance maneuvers. In our fucked-up American culture right now, the theater is virtually the only place (other than the occasional, remote nude beach!) where the naked body is allowed a public presence in real time. The minute I take my clothes off in these performances—and I do in all of them except _Stretch Marks_—the whole theater changes. The spectators shift in their seats, stop breathing, become aware of their sweat making their underwear stick to their legs.

In my own work I am more interested in using my naked body as an avenue for exploring the most vulnerable, human, humorous, and fucked-up parts of myself than in using it as a seduction to display the cutest possible person in the cutest possible light at the cutest possible moment in the show! I hope that will mean that nudity onstage can be seen as part of the palette of things theater artists can explore in performance. A naked wee-nie or butt is not that interesting in itself but rather becomes important for us to look at as it reveals the feelings, complexity, desires, details, and revelations of our lives.

In a way, all of my work is about being cast naked out of paradise, the Ur-drama of Western civilization. The first performance
in this book, *Some Golden States*, takes place in that backyard gar- den of my childhood home in Whittier, a kind of low-rent Gar- den of Eden with a K-Mart nearby. The show begins with my hometown’s earthquake shaking the clothes off my body. Cast out of “paradise” by the shaking of my world, I paper-clip a leaf over my crotch and head almost naked into the world.

Awareness of my nakedness and the culturally communicated shame that piggybacks on our skin is a crucial tension in all my work. I was a big nudist as a child, always sneaking around naked when no one was looking. Intuitively I knew that my naked body was a kind of secret weapon, my best hope to fight back against the cultural signals that discipline us to imagine we’re somehow dirty and unworthy. In the performance script of *My Queer Body*, I remember . . .

when I was a little boy. I would come home from church and take off all my clothes, the suit the tie and the tight shoes, and put my naked little boy’s body between the polyester sheets. Loving the feelings on my skin. Making them mine. Reclaim- ing my body from church and state.

(The long arm of the law would catch up with that kid when the National Endowment for the Arts would take away his grants in 1990 for reclaiming his naked, queer body and sexuality, but more on that in the introduction to that show.) We meet that anarchic little boy again in *Glory Box* when I get naked in a charming section about how I used to take off all my clothes when I was five and climb in my mom’s wooden hope chest. I would snug- gle into my mom’s fake chinchilla bolero jacket to breathe in that cedar-drenched world. My adult naked body in the performance becomes sweetly redolent of childhood longing and memories and invites all the metaphors that we can cram in that hope chest with me naked!

Now, I’ve written this naked-in-the-hope-chest stuff as a short story for the page, but there is something about my naked
body in real time in the theater crammed into that hope chest on
the stage that totally changes, deepens the text. It gets the words
sweaty! As long as I don’t get splinters in my butt, that’s what I
want to do! Get those words to become FLESH!

Why I Spill the Autobiographical Beans

As good as all this sounds (I hope)—that my solo narratives carry
with them the potential for creating community and shared
agency—I know from first-hand experience the delights, dangers,
and limits of working in the first person. The main buffet table
that I lay out as an artist comes from the juicy menu of post-
feminist, post-punk, personal-is-political, autobiographical narra-
tive. As someone who has spent my whole creative life writing and
performing stories from my experience, the tricky terrain of auto-
biography is both a favorite comfy chair and a particularly scary
attic room. I have bounced between the exquisite pleasures and
the pitfalls that are inevitably part of the encounter with one’s life
and memory. I have put myself (and, of course, my boyfriends)
through the most detailed public revelations of the psychic, emo-
tional, and sexual personal narratives that flesh is heir to. I some-
times have to remind myself that not everyone could tolerate their
lives being on display like this. Most people sensibly maintain
some pretty fixed boundaries about what is and is not available
for public consumption. Forget the aforementioned kiss-and-tell
business—to rim-and-tell (look it up) loudmouths like me, these
boundaries just function as a tempting dare to dive into what I
hope might be a deeper, more-naked-than-skin truth.

I have kept a journal consistently since I was in fifth grade.
The fact that I first picked up a spiral notebook at the age of ten
and began writing daily about what happened to me is a hugely
important fact of my life. Every bit as important as the fact that
when I was fourteen I realized that I was gay, and that it was my
fate to love the boy next door. I would hazard that my obsessive
need as a boy-child to document my story was tightly bound up with the inchoate inkling that I would soon also have to rewrite their story, the heterosexual narrative! Naturally, a rewrite wasn’t enough. It was just one flouncy leap from writing these stories down to performing them as a means of claiming identity with a public witness. Long before I began going to school dressed like Oscar Wilde when I was fifteen—an early conceptual, durational performance piece that was inspired by a play about Wilde on PBS’s *Theater in America*—the impulse to tell my stories was my first declaration to the world that I was here and before too long would also be queer.

My favorite book during that revelatory Wildean sophomore year of high school was *The Confessions of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*. (This should have tipped everyone off right then that I was destined to be a naked, queer performance artist!) I suppose I was inspired by Rousseau’s urgent need in his *Confessions* to spill all the beans: his obsessive masturbation, his penchant for indecent exposure in public parks, and so on. I learned that as salubrious as it is to spill those garbanzos in the privacy of your own Pee-Chee folder, it’s even better to spread them out à la carte, to perform them for all to see. Since the moment I did my first feverish scribblings in my gay boy’s adolescent journal—the crazed scrawl as panicky as a seismograph after an 8.1 earthquake—I have always seen writing about my life to be a fundamental act of knowing myself, of claiming space, and of simple survival. The act of remembering and sharing that memory with others became a crucial way to survive the shit that the world would strew in my path. As an adolescent I figured that if Rousseau’s autobiographical ranting could start the French Revolution, my own might at least get me through high school so I could finally find a boyfriend. During the rigors of individuating as a gay boy in hate-filled America, I had somehow begun to believe that the act of writing and performing about my life just might be a way to find the potential to transform it. If the truth be told, I have never stopped
believing this. Telling these life stories in my performances has always carried the potential for transforming my reality.

There is such a sweet hopelessness in trying to write from your life, a built-in certainty that whatever you cull will not be as layered or true as what any of us goes through in a single day. How can I hope in my performances to get at the knotty tendons of how complex real life actually is? Every time I try to tell a story from my life, I am pulling the words out through a shrinking device that makes the feelings and the experience and the joys and the shit seem all vaguely squeezed. It’s as if you were trying to coax the last bit of toothpaste (or K-Y for that matter!) out of the tube and onto your trembling toothbrush (or red-purple cock). Like Pepe Le Pew forever caught in the grip of a Warner Bros. cartoon laundry wringer, I am in for trouble every time I start to tell a story about what has gone on in my life.

I know that the words I squeeze out of the tube and onto the page and finally onto the stage will never be as true or wet as the messy experiences as they are lived from day to day. Inevitably, the act of writing will distill, edit, change, compress, compact, alter, disguise, enhance, and reduce the raw mess of living. But parallel to that is another magic trick at work. As real as those perils are, the story from life can also hone, expose, reveal, connect, and dig up something from inside me that I can use to build a future. I know all too well that any arrangement of subjects and verbs I might find to describe my life story may well be insufficient by comparison to the actual wet feeling of the real thing, yet I know I must keep trying to find these words, write them, fling them from the stage and the page, or I will go fucking nuts from anger and fear.

Pushing beyond my more extravagant storytelling habits (my mix-master metaphors, attraction to puns, and shameless hyperbole, for starters), I want to find the words that might invite you into this place where I live. I perform these stories in the hope that someone else just might understand what it has felt like to
walk around in my smelly shoes. Contrary to the notion that autobiographical storytelling is a closed system, I actually think that when I tell a story about my first kiss, the audience knows their main job is to recall the story of their first kiss. The intimacy of the direct-to-the-audience first-person address gives permission for everybody to sift through their inner snapshot album. Free from the totalizing conceit of realistic theater, my telling of my life stories is primarily a challenge for the audience to remember their own narratives. On a good day I can hold these stories out to them in the palm of my hand, in a clear light, as a shiny mirror to look into.

A User’s Manual for This Book

Some Golden States, the show that begins the volume, is not my first piece. It was preceded by six full-evening works that were all developed between 1980 and 1986 at Performance Space 122 in New York City, the arts center I co-founded in 1980 with Charles Dennis, Charles Moulton, and Peter Rose. These included my earliest work, created at the age of twenty-one, a lean-and-mean, queer-punk vision called Paint Yrself Red/Me & Mayakovsky, which grandly connected my Southern California suburban childhood to the great Soviet playwright and revolutionary. The next year I collaborated with my new boyfriend John Bernd on an ongoing performance project called Live Boys, about meeting, falling in love, and breaking up. A life-as-art process which no one should try without adult supervision. Since I came to New York City as a dancer, my work Postwar (1982) combined crazed movement, complex multimedia, a little text, and lawnmowers to explore the anomic and horror of growing up in nuclear America as it collided with the first Reagan term, when we all imagined he was going to blow up the world at any minute. I got a tremendous amount of international attention for this work, which puffed up my twenty-three-year-old self to no end and led me to my Hollywood period: my bloated, though well-intentioned,

I felt washed-up at the age of twenty-six and moped around in my bathrobe for a few weeks groping for support from my boyfriend Doug Sadownick, my life partner from 1982 to 1995, and the outside eye and frequent composer for these early works. Finally with *Buddy Systems* (1986), the chastened Wunderkind came back to a high-energy, stripped-down performance that relied on words, storytelling, and physical performance to make some sparks as I told a bittersweet story of gay love—my relationship with Doug and our new dog Buddy. With AIDS rattling the windows, I knew I had a big job to do as a queer artist. I did not assume that I would live to see the age of thirty. It was at this point in my journey that my concerns, social vision, and performance inclinations really jelled. Doug and I moved to Los Angeles and I took off a big bite to chew with *Some Golden States*. 
The earlier works were lively, risk-taking, and exploratory. They did not rely so much on text to carry the oomph of the performance, so I have not included them in this volume. However, along with my two tossed-salad “best of” shows, also not in this collection, Sex/Love Stories (1990) and the medley program based on my book of memoirs, Shirts & Skin (1997), I recall all these performances with great fondness and discernible tumescence.

This book starts with my first really confident, narrative, writerly piece, Some Golden States (1987), a tale of being cast from paradise into the world. Stretch Marks (1989), the second piece, pulls me toward the beginning of a personal-meets-political ACT UP worldview. I make my grab at the big shamanic brass ring in My Queer Body (1992), which describes my descending into the underworld and managing to find my way back. Naked Breath (1994) reveals a more intimate and quieter way of relating to AIDS, my history, and a single street in Manhattan. There’s a joyful tribute to first sex/first love in Fruit Cocktail (1996). Finally, Glory Box (1999), about the struggle for gay marriage and immigration rights, connects my strongest writing, sharpest humor, and most emotional expression. In Glory Box I focus on the scary challenges my partner Alistair (who’s from Australia) and I have been going through these last seven years to keep him in the United States, a country that denies all gay couples the immigration rights that all heterosexual married couples are afforded.

The performances included in this book are the shows I have been presenting all over the world for the last fifteen years. They mark a queer boy’s progress through a Whittier childhood, falling in love, learning German from a Mexican lesbian in high school, confronting HIV-AIDS, surviving earthquakes, learning about relationships, challenging the state apparatus, growing fruit, falling naked into a volcano, and facing being forced to leave his country to stay with the man he loves. All this and jokes too! I feel lucky to have had all the performances documented by the extraordinary New York City photographer Dona Ann McAdams,
a lifelong friend and co-conspirator. Dona’s photos bring the breath, the body, the sweat, and the real-time heat of the performances to these pages.

**Here We Go**

In my performances I hope I have tried to dig as deep as I can at the things in my life that make me bang my head against the wall. All my work as a performer, writer, teacher, and activist has consistently tried to find the connections between my personal story and what happens in the society I inhabit. Jumping off into the deep end from the autobiographical diving board, I urgently look for the links between my words and my body, between my heart and my head, between my personal life and the world around me, between myself and the audience. I want to shake the trees and create community through the weird and exciting reality of performing.

I confess I have a completely unsubstantiated faith that if I tell my stories, I may be able to affect how the narrative will end. I have always used the memories of things past to rewrite the ending of what is to come. I have done this from that first moment that I picked up my Pee-Chee folder at the age of ten, wrote a play, and somehow knew that the queer boy star of my story was not going to end up hanging by his neck from a beam in our family’s detached suburban garage. I tell these stories of who I have been to imagine who I might become. Even now as I write this introduction, knowing that my beloved Alistair and I will probably be forced very soon to leave this troubled nation, I tell my stories in these performances as a fierce act of imagining our future.

Tim Miller
millertale@aol.com
http://hometown.aol.com/millertale/timmiller.html
Body Blows