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■ ■ ■ 'What Are You Afraid Of?' How about a poetry reading at a mortuary?

By Maria Donato

You could say people were dying to get in.

But then again, it's not every night that you can hear a poetry reading in a mortuary.

Or get to play "Wheel of Misfortune" with hosts Pat Slayback and Vanna Fright, and con-

testants who can choose from the categories of psychopaths, schizophrenics, mass murderers and U.S. presidents.

The contestants, in turn, answered in short poems while slides of the correct murderers' gruesome deeds were flashed on the walls behind them.

The event was "Psychopoetica: What Are You Afraid Of?" produced and directed by Jean

Howard, featuring the Chicago Poetry Ensemble and recently held in Manisecalco Chapel, a mortuary-turned-performance space at 441 W. North Ave.

The group didn't need to do much to create a realistic set. The dressing room table was an embalming slab. The alcove once used to display coffins became the music pit. There, ensemble member Billy Jonas

Gein, she explained, was the Plainfield, Wis., farmer who was a convicted murderer and apparently liked to party around in graves, including his own mother's.

Howard's poem, inspired by the Gein atrocities, was recently published in "Psychopoetica," an anthology put out by Hull University in England and the inspiration for the poetic theater performance.

The idea to hold the performance in a mortuary came to Howard after she unsuccessfully tried to buy a different mortuary for a living space.

"I guess I'm just fascinated by all this," she said, explaining that she was raised as a Mormon in Salt Lake City. When she was a young girl, her family's idea of a fun outing was to visit cemeteries.

## Marketing and modeling

Howard now supports herself as a marketing account executive and as a professional model, and appears regularly at the Green Mill's Sunday night poetry slams. Her works have appeared everywhere from Harpers' magazine to the Chicago Council of Fine Arts' "Dial-A-Poem."

"Psychopoetica" is a continuation of her aim to "break poetry out of its restrictive stereotypical formats."

"The only people who read poetry books or go to readings are other poets," she said. "So by making it animated and adding more acting, maybe I can trick some slob at a bar into listening to a poet."

Howard said the poetry ensemble is considering resurrecting the "Psychopoetica" show for Halloween. In the meantime, her next performance will be June 23 in Lower Link's Hall, 3435 N. Sheffield Ave., a space she describes as "a little vampire bar, because of its red walls and red lights."

In her newest venture she explores the "relationship between the perpetrator and his victim from the perpetrator's point of view." She plans to recite her monologue while eating a raw steak, with wolves howling in the background. The piece is entitled (what else?) "Eating Meat."

Who says poetry's dead, any-



Photo by Steve Garret

"Psychopoetica" cast members (from left) John Sheehan, Jean Howard, Rob Van Tuyle and Karen Nystrom.

toyed with various percussion instruments and used an empty plastic water cooler as a drum.

Jonas, appearing onstage as a bright red longjohns while clutching a teddy bear, performed one of the evening's few musical numbers, "Scary Noises." His song, expressing childhood fears of things that go bump in the night, provided one of the evening's lighter notes.

Then there was John Sheehan, a former priest, who ran through a list of everyday fears, including being "afraid that my fears are just too boring."

On the darker side was Caskey's "Death Duet," a poem that explores sexual fears and women's fear of rape.

## Fears and voyeurism

The idea for the performance was twofold, said Howard. First, it examined those childhood fears that follow us through adulthood. Second, it was an investigation of the voyeuristic fascination we all seem to have with the macabre, whether gawking at a grisly car accident as adults or incorporating as children gruesome murders in jump-rope songs, such as the Lizzie Borden ditty that was recited onstage as jump ropes slipped rhythmically on the floor at the performance's beginning.

"We all have that dark side; and our fears aren't just a question of who's out there to get us, but who's inside each of us to get out there and do these things," said Howard. "What makes one person who's had a seemingly normal background come out okay, and another turn into an Ed Gein?"