

READER

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CHICAGO'S FREE WEEKLY

Skin Pics



Photo: Steve Garrett

TATTOO, TABOO

at ARC Gallery

by Mary Shen Barnidge
There's a discount on admission

for *Tattoo, Taboo* if you display a "visible tattoo." The woman in the box office gives me my \$2 off when I show her the blue-and-red flower on my left ankle. Well, of course it's a fake! Whattaya think, I'm crazy?

What kind of pervert deliberately mutilates himself like that?

What kind, indeed? and like what? These are the questions explored by the ensemble of actors, dancers, photographers, and poets who make up *Tattoo, Taboo* at ARC Gallery. An advertisement warns, "Not for the queasy," but this is no Sweeney-Todd-the-Demon-Tattooist creepshow—not a single needle is seen onstage. What is seen are pictures of such elaborate and breathtaking beauty that we forget what they are until a buttock or a shoulder blade suddenly jars us out of our detachment—but not, perversely, our enjoyment. "I'm an artist," says one of Marc Smith's tattooist characters. "My canvas is human flesh."

Yes, what kind of person gets tattooed? An Egyptian slave fleeing to the Temple of Hercules, where the tattoo of the god means that he can never be retaken by his former owner; a warrior from Borneo with a black ring on his hands for every enemy he's slain; a Sioux brave who cannot pass into the hereafter, the "many lodges," unless all his marks are in order. "Do you have one?" an actor taunts the audience. "Your lawyer could have one—he wears

long sleeves and he is not what he seems. Your mother could have one—she is much younger since you left home."

And what's a tattoo, anyway? When the doorman at the disco stamps your hand, is that a tattoo? When your child writes his name on his hand with a ballpoint pen, is that a tattoo? How permanent must the mark be to become unacceptable to our culture? And how physical must the mark be? Morgan McCabe tells the story of her repressed childhood and the husband who left her after 15 years—"He said I was unmarked by life"—and how she was liberated by a scar from a parking-lot brawl. "People looked at me with respect and they were not the people I had known before—these were people who had been marked by life." She takes us on a tour of her numerous tattoos, explaining the event in her life symbolized by each one—"We should wear our lives for all to see."

A little later, another actor tells us, "The only sound way to make the decision is to go off by yourself and meditate about it. . . and come to grips with your body. The tattoo will let you know if it wants you and where."

That's pretty heavy philosophy,

(a young Maori girl, a Japanese priestess) with strength and versatility. The only part of the program that seems not to contribute anything is Pat Fischer Selby's dance. When she first disrobes to contemplate her naked body as an easel for a possible work of art, the connection is clear, but when she dons a robe and rooster mask, the dance becomes no more than another *National Geographic*-anthro-aboriginal exercise.

especially when written in technical scar tissue, and this show could easily have been a nice, safe, lecture-with-slides freak show. Not this time, though—and forget every poet you ever heard droning behind a podium—Jean Howard, who assembled and directs *Tattoo, Taboo*,

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has people speaking the poetry in duet conversation or counterpoint harmony (while the man from Borneo laments, "No girl loves me for myself. I'm a man rich with slaughtered wealth," one of the girls gues him from the next table: "This guy is loaded. He deals in figures—oooh, hold me back!"). By far the most memorable (tattooed on our memory?) performance of the evening is Marc Smith's seven portraits of philosopher-tattooists. Smith

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looks vaguely like Anthony Perkins and has a voice as cold as the ice used by ear piercers for anesthesia but as smooth as a hypodermic syringe; as he moves from sadist ("Let's face it, man. They get off on havin' me poke their titties") to hard-working craftsman ("lashed to this chair for 14 hours grinding it out

izing aesthete ("It was a beautiful experience. . . a huge butterfly just below her neck"), he dares us to pull back or look away and we can't, not even when he jumps off the stage and talks straight into our faces: "Will you let me touch the life line of your palm? Place a finger on your neck inside the collarbone? What part of you can I grab?"

Dwight Okita does not perform his own work here, something the other poets do, but the task of per-

atives is carried out with winsome witfulness by Paul Myers. Morgan McCabe, ripe and golden as a bowl of branded peaches, marages to disarm our notions both about the type of women who wear tattoos and about the disfiguring effect of such—I mean, if a three-inch scythe on one cheekbone could make me look like that, I'd get one right now. No less alluring, with the kind of purr that reminds us that even kittens have needle-sharp teeth, Jean How-

the Marcel Duchamp Memorial Players, Celeste Machirol, and Paul Thompson, respectively) stay out of the way, which is exactly what they should do in this kind of a show.

No, *Tattoo, Taboo* didn't make me want to run out to Clark and Belmont for a "Death Before Dishonor" or a "Born to Raise Hell"—my ankle flower will fade in a day or two—but putting on my makeup in the morning suddenly became a whole different act for me. See what