

# Gender blender

Hormonally charged pop icons and sexless postmodern dance come together in Splendor

By Thomas Connors



**SHE SELLS SEA SHELLS** Germond communicates femininity by doing a modified forward bend, wearing a wig and posing by a large body of water.

Rachel Thorne Germond's got a thing for the King. Yeah, Elvis. The way he moved. His hips, his legs. It sounds like a crush, but for Germond, this attention isn't idle adoration, but a jumping-off point for exploring gender. Since 1991, she's done about half a dozen pieces pegged to Presley. When her company, RTG Dance, hits Links Hall on Friday 9 with *Splendor: More Dances*, Elvis will be in the building.

Presley isn't the only icon Germond has channeled. Marilyn Monroe is another one. "Back in 1990," she explains, "I was studying composition with Anna Sokolow, learning all about preclassic dance forms, *pavanes* and things like that. At the same time, I was also taking class at the [Merce] Cunningham studio. So I was going through this little conflict between narrative and abstraction. Then I went to see an Andy Warhol exhibit with all these images of Marilyn Monroe and Elvis Presley."

Taken by these representations of very public sexualities, Germond set out to examine the way physical behavior telegraphs identity. Her 1990 piece *Five Marylins* was based on Warhol's work of the same name. "It was all about female sexuality and empowerment," she says. "The

movement came out of watching her movies." That initial investigation didn't compute with some of Germond's colleagues. In the contemporary dance world—especially that component that traces its origins to the postmodernism of the early 1960s—choreography had to be gender-neutral, stripped of any suggestion of distinctly male/female dynamics.

In fact, an otherwise sympathetic observer asked, "Why are you doing this about Marilyn Monroe? Why wouldn't you do it about some-

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one like Katharine Hepburn?" True, Hepburn's essentially desexualized persona would make a great source for a study in transcending gender roles, but Germond was pointedly examining traditional, even stereotypical, manifestations of gender and sexuality.

Germond persisted. Her next piece was *Three Elvisses*. Since ar-

riving in Chicago from New York in 2001, she's appeared as Presley with the Chicago Kings' dyke drag revue. But as Germond is quick to point out, her concert-dance incarnations are not impersonations. "I'm a womanly woman," she says. "I have large breasts. It's not that I'm impersonating Elvis. It's about transformation. I get to explore moving in ways I would never move, to see what it means to move like a guy, or, in the case of Marilyn Monroe, like an extreme female." When Germond takes the stage this weekend, she'll perform a solo that merges the two personalities.

For the dances of *Splendor*, she's also taking inspiration from the music of Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane, Bread and Naked City to consider another aspect of America's cultural landscape: the '60s. At 42, Germond is a tad too young to have participated in that volatile era, but as a young hanger-on at the Rhode Island School of Design when hippies ruled the campus, and the child of artists, she soaked up the mood of the counterculture and, like many of us, still tries to make sense of that era.

"I started with Hendrix, just wanting to move to that music," she says. "That led me to the '60s and I began looking into that period, thinking about the idealism—how it didn't necessarily work, but admiring it." In a group piece titled *Today*, Germond builds on the spirit of the decade—its psychedelic delight and war-riven angst—to create a dance whose arc is both contemporary and timeless. "The piece is mostly a dialogue between the rational and comforting and the uncomfortable and the fantastic. In a way, it has to do with my own grappling with those two elements in artmaking: imagination and the

need to make order. Oddly enough, more and more I find that the more structured I am in my practices, the more chances and risks I'm able to take imaginatively."

**RTG Dance performs Splendor: More Dances Friday 9 through Sunday 11 at Links Hall. See listings.**