

Single, but not ready to mingle, in newest solo show

Entire worlds of sweet insecurity created with gestures, music.

Bio & Theater review By KRISTINA CHURCH

Randy Rutherford is a multifaceted artist whose career originated in Alaska.

He started as a folk singer and guitarist, but a burgeoning musical career was cut short when he began to experience progressive and irreversible hearing loss. He then turned to painting, earning a Master of Fine Arts degree, but found that the solitary creative life of a visual artist only compounded the isolation his hearing loss had created.

Seeking connection and collaboration, Rutherford then fell into the world of solo performance, more commonly called the "one-man show".

Rutherford's technique is a kind of expanded storytelling format, in which he riffs on autobiographical themes. More than just a good story, each of Rutherford's solo shows also charts the trajectory of some emotional awakening or inner epiphany, which coincides with the outer events of the tale. There's always a lot of gentle sarcasm, a lot of physical comedy and a lot of spot-on character portrayal. But Rutherford's performance pieces bring it all home to a deeper place: one of acceptance, truth and love.

Alone, on a bare stage, with only his guitar and a glass of water to back him up, Rutherford manages to create an entire world with only his voice, his face and his movements. Always there is Randy, our wry, self-deprecating narrator, who overlaps with Randy, the charming nerdy protagonist. But along the way, Rutherford introduces us to a host of eccentric characters that people his inner and outer worlds.

In his latest installment, "This May Feel A Little Funny," Rutherford explores his social anxieties and his reticence to "mingle". His natural introversion is exacerbated by the hearing loss, making it difficult to connect with people in a group setting.

So after his divorce, at age 40, he finds himself in something of a social slump. A friend advises him to attend a weekend Dance Jam, a Northern California institution in which folks come together for a couple of days of "improvisational contact dancing". If you're not sure what that might be, don't worry; neither was Rutherford until he saw it for himself.

So our hapless hero packs up his tent and head up to the mountains for a new experience. Sadly, he's hampered in his quest by two unfortunate circumstances: 1) He can't dance, and 2) he's brought the wrong kind of clothes, the kind that scream "I don't belong!" Somehow, Rutherford manages to make his own kind of contact, in his own unique way, with this alien bunch of folks.

As always in a Rutherford show, it's music that softens the boundaries between people and allows them to touch each other in healing ways. And the performance mirrors the story; as Rutherford softly strums his guitar and sings a familiar snippet of music, you can feel the borders between the performer and the audience dissolve.

And so begins Rutherford's journey past his own inhibitions and fears. He emerges on the other side, having loved, lost and learned about himself. But it's his willingness to take us, the audience, along on the journey that makes Rutherford's performance so involving. In his highly personal recounting of his own experiences, we see ourselves, in all our glory and all our awkwardness.

"This May Feel A Little Funny" is by turns a love story, a humorous look at California's alternative life style culture and the history of a man's reluctant emergence from a protective cocoon. Rutherford slowly learns to move past his initial fearful reaction to things that are strange and alien and intimidating. In doing so, he comes to see that what is unusual and unsettling can also be beautiful and deeply alive.

It's the gestures in this piece that linger in my mind. Rutherford's evocation of "Hummingbird Woman", a shimmering, constantly moving creature who captivates Randy's imagination, is a simple but effective quivering of his fingers. There's a hilarious sequence about trying some new sexual techniques, in which Rutherford manages to stay just this side of what might be too graphic on stage. And there's a deeply moving gesture he makes when describing how the armor around his heart begins to fall away: two clenched fist with interlaced fingers, slowly opening up and beginning to relax into softness, like a flower beginning to bloom.

It's easy to see why Rutherford has received top marks at many fringe (theatre) festivals across the continent. Thursday's small but appreciative opening-night audience gave rapt attention to Rutherford's performance, emitting sighs of empathy and hearty guffaws at turns during the show, and then vigorously applauding at it's close.

If you haven't seen a Rutherford show yet, you owe it to yourself to check out "This May Feel A Little Funny". It's yet another wise and wonderful creation by a talented and insightful artist.