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photo: Darrol Hofmeister

Altered State

Local artist's new play challenges our perception of reality

by Carle Steel

Kaleidocycle

Globe Theatre

May 31-June 9

In the *Kaleidocycle* props and costume workshop, three guru costumes await their purpose. The garments are white, cotton, diaphanous, festooned with flowers and jewels. Each has a multi-level headdress made of cotton and paper. The costumes will serve both as projection screens, and as a metaphor for the kind of knowledge that comes lightly, when you need it most.

Regina-based interdisciplinary artist Chrystene Ells uses the term "guru" loosely. They are the scholars and new age teachers she sought out after she was struck with a brain seizure two years ago that left her

in a kind of hallucinatory state that lasted for months.

She was at an art gallery when it happened. One minute, she says, she was looking at a painting; the next she came unstuck from her body, and was able to watch it from above. In some ways, she's never come back from that long graceful flight away from her body and life as she'd known it.

The seizure had been coming for a while, Ells says, preceded by a sensation of being disconnected from this plane of existence. It took out the language centre of her brain and rearranged everything else. She got by with rudimentary sign language and the help of friends. She slept little. She rode her bike all night sometimes, through this new hyperworld that suddenly glistened and sparkled with life.

She spent hours in nature, moving in and out of communion with other creatures she met in her travels. Once, she recalls, a butterfly in a storm grabbed her finger with all of its little feet, willing her, she felt, to save its life. Another time she stood watching a deer nibbling grass and felt the sensation of eating grass with her own suddenly strange and furry lips. For a full year, she was half convinced she'd died and was in some sort of afterlife where everything was much more fun.

Though medical tests were inconclusive, doctors prescribed medications by the handful. She didn't take them. "The farther I got from the event itself the less faith I had in the medical world to give any kind of diagnosis or definitive explanation," says Ells. "The longer I lived with it the

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happier I felt and the more I began to see the lightness of life and the connectedness of things.”

Though it was clear something was going on in her brain, she began to wonder if it was something that needed medicating at all. “Like any contemporary human being, I googled my symptoms and hit search,” she recalls.

In her research, she stumbled on a whole other category of thought on what she was experiencing. “What we might call temporal lobe epilepsy, some traditions would call kundilini rising, or kriya, the trembling, contortion and gesticulation that happens as a natural positive evolutionary experience.”

“I’ve always been fairly jaded about the whole crystals and dolphins and fairies thing,” says Ells, a veteran theatre artist and painter who moved to Regina from California in 2006 to do her master’s degree in film. “I lived in San Francisco for so long, where everyone’s got copper wire in their hair to keep the aliens from contacting them.”

Still, she says, there was something universal and compelling about what she was reading. “In other cultures, if someone starts doing cartwheels on their front lawn for weeks on end they don’t say ‘Oh, this person needs to be locked up in the loony bin.’ They say, ‘This person is god-intoxicated.’”

Other scholars speak of a “spiritual emergency”, an abrupt evolution that can be the result of a seizure like hers, or some other major life event. Sometimes, spiritual emergencies come from nowhere. “It’s the idea that a person, for whatever reason, sometimes just steps off a bus and that’s it: they’ve had a collision with the infinite,” says Ells. “They’re jettisoned out of their body and life is never the same.”

Translating the trippiness of her experience into an experimental theatre work has been a challenge, not least because many of Ells’ skills as a director were wiped out by the seizure. “I was having trouble with time and space and language. I began reaching out to artists I’d worked with and asked them to help me find ways of articulating the universality of this experience.

“For the first time in my life as a director I’m really not sure about what I’m doing,” she says. “I think that’s part of what died when all of this happened.”

Ells approached the story through a laboratory process, drawing on different art practices like film, dance, music and poetry to complement the writing she did during her months-long bicycle trip into the divine.

She took the results of the lab work to the ensemble cast of performers Mark Claxton, Aubree Erickson, Avianna Hudym, American Sign Language poet Joanne Weber and filmmaker and co-producer Berny Hi. What they’ve created is a fractured portrait of the inside of a brain through a mix of media projection, physical theatre, mask, shadow play, music and poetry.

“In a weird way it was probably the most healing thing I could have done around this experience. But it’s also been the hardest possible way of integrating understanding and articulating this thing,” says Ells.

After two years of research and a new and altered life, Ells says she doesn’t have the answer to any of it. She exists now on both planes, gathering information along the way. “Sometimes the gurus are just people you run into, or a cat in a windowsill, a butterfly that sits drying its wings with soft pulsing after it almost died,” she says.

“That’s a guru.”



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