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"Keeping Our Beaches Bare"

A Playwright's Adventure in Naturism

By Johanna Adams

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As a theater artist, you sometimes find yourself in bizarre situations, situations that cause you to look back and wonder, "How the hell?" For me, sitting naked on the grass a couple of weekends ago at the Lupin Naturist Club in the Santa Cruz Mountains, watching a play I wrote with collaborator Martin E. Williams alongside some 60 naturists – not naturalists – qualifies as a head scratcher. Weird enough to have all 60 people in the audience naked. Weirder still to have the playwright and the director, Amber Jackson, naked while the actors remain clothed for most of the play. It felt like one of those anxiety nightmares actors are always getting.

Nude on the Beach chronicles the first naturist experience of a young couple visiting San Onofre beach. Mark Storey, a feature writer for the Naturist Society's magazine, *Nude & Natural*, located the play on the Internet and invited Martin and me to premiere it at the Society's annual Western gathering and pose for (gulp) pictures for his publication.

There were challenges. First, casting the thing; you have no idea how many Orange County actors are okay with personal nudity and not okay with audience nudity. Telling the people at work why I wanted time off. Figuring out

where to keep the keys to the room we were sleeping in once we got there. Trying to look natural eating sausage links in a room with 25 or so naked men.

But the ultimate had to be the nude audience talk-back – the point at which a playwright gets up in front of the audience at the end of the play and asks for criticism. Kind of like a performance review at work – only you're totally naked. Comments are supposed to be



restricted to the script, but the naked people wanted to point out that the actors' pubic hair was too well-trimmed for first-time naturists (I guess they think only naturists go in for landing strips) and complain about the lack of acoustics in the outdoor performance space. Stuff I have no real control over, you know?

Then they gave us some really great praise: "We could have written this ourselves." "It is just like the first naturist experience my husband and I had!"

San Onofre beach mom Marianna Handler was on-hand for the show. (For those of you who aren't as naturist savvy as me, the "beach mom" is a nurturing older woman on a nudist beach who informally monitors the sand, knows everyone and mothers the naturists.) She said that if it had really happened on her beach, she would have been a character in the play. She would have shown up to find out why the nice newcomers were fighting and talked them out of their clothes in a flash.

From my brief experience with them, the naturists seemed warm and welcoming. People you don't mind hanging all out with. My cast and director – all of us first timers – found ourselves oddly comfortable with it after a while.

The day I got back from Lupin, I wrote a quick recommendation for my high school speech and debate coach. She has been nominated for an Outstanding Educator Award this year, and this gave me the chance to thank her for the confidence to play naked. I'm not going to have that nightmare where I'm naked onstage anymore. I've been there, done that.

Adams' full-length play Cockfighters was produced by Hunger Artists early this year and is scheduled for its off-off-Broadway premiere with New York City's Oberon Theatre Ensemble in January 2003. Rude Guerilla Theatre will produce Nude on the Beach in November. ☆