

Are You Ready to Melt Down?

By John Kricorian

A simple principle of Bronwyn Rucker and Rick Russo, co-founders of Meltdown, Inc: "everyone is an artist." Meltdown synergizes community, businesses and non-profits and turns ordinary folks into artists. It has put professional actors and women from the Armory Shelter into their own production. It combines social work, community service, public and business awareness and transformational art. Whoa.

One of the best examples of Meltdown's work, *Voices From the Armory*, uses a script Rucker and Armory women co-developed. *Voices* brings to the theater the truth of the Armory women's lives: abuse, addiction, accident, and newfound discipline. *Voices* reveals women leading healthful lives. Our lives and theirs are informed by their battering past experiences.

Russo is the experimental composer who brought together the internationally acclaimed John Cage Meets Sun Ra concert at Coney Island. He earns Meltdown money by providing a

business and public service. "I have an excellent reputation from my work with BACA/Brooklyn Arts Council as an organizer of large events." Street fairs, like the Fabulous 5th Avenue Fair, parades and other events - including a recent Macy's opening - provide the majority of Meltdown's funds. Rucker and Russo use the events to take their art to the street.

Rucker wins Meltdown grant funding and recently received recognition from NYC Comptroller Alan Hevesi for her work in the city-wide Stop The Violence Week. Rucker views artists in a compassionate societal role. "We have to create ways in which we can work together and artists are naturally good at that.... Art is about communicating the truth of oneself to another person." In addition to work in Meltdown's Intergenerational Program and *Voices*, Rucker developed *Teen Scenes*, scripts for teens to deal with sexual conduct, drug use and racism.

One Scene, *Safer Sex Negotiation*, depicts Michael and Felicia on the night Michael makes his move. They

have a little wine, they're on the couch, they kiss. Suddenly she leaps up - to get a condom. Michael reacts, misunderstanding Felicia - does she doubt his sexuality, or think he's into drugs? No, she's just practical about pregnancy and AIDS. Their negotiation is driven by insecurity, desire - and love. Michael once mistakes Felicia's hypothetical proposition "what if we have a fight and you go out with some other girl" for doubt about their relationship and says "I thought we were getting along pretty good." But when he catches on that she just wants to be careful, they go offstage to "practice."

The Scenes are like Rucker and Russo: intense, sensitive, caring and unafraid of ideals. Some of the idealized Scenes seem oversimplified - as when in a date rape scene there are twelve lines of dialogue, one aborted kiss, then the stage direction "he rapes her." But the high energy, interactive learning and gritty content outweigh the lack of professional polish.

Meltdown is powered by compassion and idealism. Though some artists

have received compensation, most of the work is volunteer. Says Russo, "...if we weren't willing to work for nothing, Meltdown wouldn't stay alive." City budget cuts won't slow Meltdown much, because of the dedication of Rucker, Russo and other volunteers and because Meltdown funds itself through business and public services in their events organizing and social outreach.

Why call it Meltdown? Says Rucker "I got into bed one night when I was very tired and I had this half-waking dream that I was melting into my bed." They had been doing happenings for awhile and saw that the challenge of the happenings was to let go of a polished, product-oriented aesthetic and get into the process of participating in the happening. Let down barriers. The happenings became "Meltdowns."

Go check out *Voices From the Armory* and other happenings. Watch for Meltdown street events this summer. You can talk to Rucker or Russo for more information at 857-MELT.