

By ERIKA MILVY

**A**LLYING himself with the astronomer Nicholas Copernicus, Brooklyn-born poet/philosopher/performer Copernicus (ne Joseph Smalkowski), puts his audience in a bind.

If we think this raving dialecticist is mad, we mirror the ignorance of 16th-century Europeans who disbelieved the astronomer's mind-boggling theory of the solar system.

In the first solo performance of his short, off-kilter "rock poems" (he usually is accompanied by up to 28 musicians), our Copernicus uses words as abstract artistic components to suggest his philosophy that nothing exists. His speech patterns, cryptic meanings and tormented soul recall those of an unmedicated schizophrenic.

Copernicus fixates on the atomic world — protons, neutrons, subatomic particles (he repeats these

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words like a mantra). But one wouldn't know, unless one read the program (at the Judith Anderson Theater), that Copernicus' nihilistic theory is based on his belief that everything above the atomic level alters so quickly that nothing can really exist. Why stability equals existence is not explained.

Copernicus' cosmic rantings are very popular in Europe, where he plays to audiences of thousands — young Europeans do enjoy intensity.

Whatever else Copernicus is, he certainly is intense. His poems are delivered at the highest of furious decibels. Haranguing like a religious fanatic, the long-haired blond beats the air, a cymbal, an electric keyboard, as he bludgeons his audience with discon-

nected thoughts. He speaks of ancient gods, identity, illusion and bacteria. "The sound of existence has disappeared into its own reality" is one relatively decipherable sentence.

"Why don't you borrow the sound of the mind?" he repeatedly asks. "Borrow the tone of a kiss?"

Copernicus' phrasings sometimes approach a sort of lyricism-in-a-vacuum, but he is gratingly self-important, a pretentious false prophet. Lacking context, his words begin to be merely noise.

Toward the show's close, Copernicus musters up some specificity as he describes a world after humanity has long gone. His tangible image of a grass-covered Empire State building is refreshing amid the vast atomic sea of zealous gibberish.

Copernicus is at the Judith Anderson Theater, 422 W. 42nd St., through Sept. 29. Phone: (212) 307-7171. Tickets: \$15.