

TimeOut
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Interview

LEARY

Does actor Copernicus revolve around *King Lear*, or is it the other way around?



Orbital lobe: Copernicus says he doesn't exist.

Over a cup of hot cocoa at Pane & Cioccolato, the performance artist Copernicus suddenly bellows, "The angel is in you!" and the power of his voice is startling. Though he's merely demonstrating his facility for transforming simple or beautiful statements into the fulminating rages of his performances, groups of NYU students, perhaps thinking he's about to murder someone, turn from their burgers to stare at this man who looks like an Old Testament prophet or, for that matter, King Lear. If the resemblance to popular images of Shakespeare's misguided king is undeniable, it's also apt, since Copernicus will perform the role in Gorilla Repertory's "environmental" production of *King Lear* in Washington Square Park.

"I am a Lear character," says Copernicus. "I'm a kind of king myself, in that I don't really have anyone telling me what to do. So I'm in touch with that sense of freedom." Clearly, he's also in touch with Lear's rage. "I was an angry young man, and I'm still angry," he says. "I have a variety of outlets for anger, I suppose. I'm a performer, for one thing, and I used to drink a lot. But when I start drinking, I just don't want to stop. I have my shows to think of now."

Born in 1939 into a devout Roman Catholic family in South Jamaica, Queens, the artist formerly known as Joseph Smalkowski renamed himself in the 1970s after the Polish astronomer who theorized that the earth revolved around the sun and not, as was commonly believed, vice versa. The contemporary Copernicus's phi-

losophy of "atomic consciousness"—the *raison d'être* of his performances—is, he insists, as important as the theories of his namesake and is embodied in the title of his ever-evolving solo show, *Nothing Exists*, which begins performances, post-Lear, at One Dream Theatre on October 31.

"All matter, including the human body, is made up of atoms," Copernicus explains. "These atoms are in constant motion, so you can't say what you are in any one moment, because that moment isn't even there. If you build a house, you will not be the person who will live in it. So in a sense, you can't even die, because you're not here. The concept of death is just the invention of people who define reality with their limited human senses. The truth is that nothing exists."

Nothing, that is, except perhaps the profits from Copernicus's canny real-estate investments in downtown Brooklyn that helped the artist produce five albums (1989's *Deeper* was hailed by *Spin* as one of the "80 excellent records of the '80s"), as well as performances at such venues as Max's Kansas City, Nada, Synchronicity Space, the Judith Anderson Theater and stadiums in Europe (he played for thousands of fans in Prague and Moscow in 1989).

"I first saw Copernicus perform maybe five years ago," says Christopher Sanderson, artistic director of Gorilla Repertory and the director of *King Lear*. "Something about him evoked, in an almost tribal, ritualistic sense, a king. He had force and power and violence. He had stepped, I felt, straight from the world of Shakespeare's *King Lear*." In fact, Copernicus and Lear were so inextricably connected in Sanderson's mind that when he decided to mount *Lear* last year, he remembered the "mad" man ranting angrily onstage—and called him in to audition.

"I had him read through the 'Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!' speech," Sanderson says, "and as a result I saw some of the hugest acting moments I have ever seen." Sanderson likens the experience to corralling a loose bull on his grandmother's farm when he was a child. "I was the only one around who could do the job, so even though I was scared, I walked straight up to the bull, which then retreated," Sanderson says. "I felt nearly the same trepidation walking up to Copernicus to give him a few notes."

Copernicus, for his part, spent the next seven months memorizing *Lear* in the kitchen of his Brooklyn digs. "I would get up early in the morning, sometimes at 4 or 5am, and go into that kitchen to be alone with Lear," he says. "And, believe me, it was a privilege. Instead of going out and being an asshole somewhere, I became Lear. He kept me out of trouble." But when *Lear* is finished, can trouble be far behind? "I have two shows in front of me now, and when *Nothing Exists* closes on November 24," he says, grinning, "I'm going to have a drink."—James Ireland Baker
King Lear is being performed in Washington Square Park beginning Thursday 22 (see *Off Broadway*).