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Putting the moves on reality

SEIZER

Featuring Leanna Brodie, Sean Dixon, Lauren Evans, Paulino Nunes. Created by Spencer Hazel. Directed by Susan Doyon. Oct 31-Nov 17. Thu-Sun 8pm. \$15. Sun PWYC. 19+. Velvet Underground, 508 Queen W. 416-538-2785.

BY KATHERINE CORNELL

Director Susan Doyon met Spencer Hazel, the multi-disciplinary English playwright, when he led a movement workshop at Theatre Gargantua a few years ago. Doyon was captivated by the way he moved actors through space. "It was unlike anything I had ever seen before. It was a new way of working with bodies."

Toronto audiences can check out Hazel's unorthodox approach in *Seizer*, which opens Oct. 31 at Velvet Underground. The untraditional venue is just one more thing that sets this show apart. The actors will also begin by standing at the bar, and the audience can move about to watch from all angles, recalling the theatre-in-the-round sightlines of a coliseum. This is entirely appropriate, since *Seizer* (as in Julius) asks us how much society has changed since the life-and-death struggles of gladiators were considered popular entertainment.

Seizer, the emperor, is one of four characters onstage. He questions his three gladiators and draws out their most intimate secrets for the pleasure of the audience. Like the coliseum spectators of ancient Rome, *Seizer's* patrons play a decisive role.



Emperor Seizer embodies modern media as he grills gladiators for deep secrets

"*Seizer* is not a play," says Hazel. "It is a physical theatre experience that combines music, text and video." He has the actors perform full-bodied movement -- more like everyday movement that is stylized and exaggerated rather than usual dance steps. The physical repertoire of many actors is limited to face and gestures, but these performers use their whole bodies.

The black walls and the eerie decorations of Velvet Underground provide the required atmosphere, casual but dark. Doyon was thrilled with "the fabulous sound system and club lights" supplied by Velvet Underground, because a regular theatre could not offer this standard of equipment.

Seizer premiered at the Boilerhouse Theatre in Edinburgh in the summer of 1996. The subsequent U.K. tour was successful with younger audiences because of the very physical presentation, the use of music and video and the novel locations. The first venue was a courtyard enclosed by the buildings of an Edwardian library. Hazel wants each production of *Seizer* to be different. "The music, text and movement can be combined in different ways." In addition to writing the script, composing the music and choreographing the movement sequences, Hazel will DJ this production.

Seizer is based on what Hazel calls our "reality fetish," contemporary society's obsession with real-life stories. For example, the actors use their real names to provoke the audience to question if the actors are talking about a character or themselves. The distinction between fact and fiction blurs. In another of Hazel's works, an actress explained that she paid her way through theatre school by working as a prostitute. Several audience members approached her afterwards to ask if it was true.

Seizer was written almost seven years ago, predating *Survivor* and its many imitators that seek to entertain by pitting people against each other. Hazel's *Seizer* stands in for the media, and the audience is challenged to decide how far it is willing to follow him as he strips away the humanity of his subjects. "How are we different