

# Penguins in the Wild West?

## Mosey on down to the park, all you avant-garde cowboys

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PROVIDENCE — Eleven years ago, in Strasbourg, France, Bob Rizzo did something he'd never done before. He made "live" art.

At the time, Rizzo says, he didn't connect his work with the "happenings" of the '60's or the so-called performance art then being pioneered by the likes of Laurie Anderson and Robert Wilson. He just followed his instincts. The result was something called *Branchprop*, a weeklong performance epic in which he alternately assembled and disassembled sculptures made from fallen tree branches.

Rizzo brings his latest performance piece, *Cowboy Movie: Western Songs, Parts I-IV*, to the Roger Williams Park Museum tonight and tomorrow night at 8:30 and Sunday afternoon at 3. Tickets are \$3. For anyone unfamiliar with the curious art-theater hybrid known as performance art, this might be a good time to get acquainted. And for anyone who has bemoaned the area's chronic lack of avant-garde theater, this might be just the thing to satisfy that craving for something completely different.

### A takeoff

As its title suggests, *Cowboy Movie* is a take off on the Hollywood western. Just how much of a take off? For openers, Rizzo's Wild West is populated by a herd of cardboard penguins and a zoot-suited saxophone player who keeps up a running commentary of honks and squeals.

Asked why there's a herd of penguins in the land of prairie dogs and longhorn steers, Rizzo, whose long hair and salt-and-pepper beard make him look like an Indian guru, says it's all part of an effort "to challenge the audience's expectations."

"During rehearsals for the piece," Rizzo

explains, "we talked over the possibility of setting some of the scenes in Alaska. And that's where the penguins came from. There's no deep meaning attached to them. We just sort of saw them as the Alaskan answer to buffalo."

The first two sections of *Cowboy Movie* premiered last December at AS220, the combination gallery and performance space in downtown Providence. From the beginning, dramatic logic was cast to the wind and scene followed scene as if in a dream. While one performer painted a Western landscape complete with flat-topped mesas and spotted ponies on a mural behind the stage, Rizzo and three other actors went through a series of choreographed movements including a stylized rain dance and a surprise attack on the unsuspecting penguins.

### No cause and effect

The effect was at once puzzling and amusing, a combination Rizzo claims is just what he's after. "A lot happens in *Cowboy Movie*," he says. "The actors do this and that. Voices come over the sound system. The problem is that the usual connections are missing. There's no cause and effect. It's a theater of images as opposed to a theater that tells stories."

Rizzo says he's been influenced by performance art generally, with its emphasis on breaking down the barriers between art, theater and music, and by the work of the Paris-based avant-garde director Robert Wilson in particular. Still, he says, his first efforts were dictated more by what he felt inside than by what other people were doing.

"At the time I started doing the performances, I really didn't have anything else in mind except a desire to come out of the studio and make art for people rather than art for a gallery. My methods may have gotten

a little more sophisticated over the years, but the original impulse is still the same."

Among those early efforts were several revivals of *Branchprop*, including productions at Roger Williams Park and Pawtucket's Slater Park in 1976. More recently, Rizzo has turned his attention toward politics and human rights. In 1983, he contacted Amnesty International with the idea of doing a performance piece that would call attention to the plight of "the disappeared," prisoners of conscience who are abducted and often murdered for disagreeing with their governments.

### Scarecrow atrocities

Titled *Something Frightening But Not Inherently Dangerous*, the production called for 40 blindfolded scarecrows to be placed around a pond near the entrance to the Lincoln campus of the Community College of Rhode Island. Each day, Rizzo would remove two or three of the scarecrows, thereby symbolizing the politically motivated kidnappings. At least, that was the plan. Unfortunately, once all the scarecrows were up, someone beat him to the punch by throwing them into the pond. The performance went on as scheduled, but not before life had imitated art in a most unexpected way.

Rizzo says that *Cowboy Movie*, which he's performed at the Mobius theater in Boston as well as in Providence, grew out of a desire to move away from the political themes that characterized his work for Amnesty International. Based on a script by Craig Watson, it proceeds according to an offbeat logic all its own. But not to worry, Rizzo says: "If you don't get it the first time around you can always come back for one of the other performances."