

STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



By Shaun Proulx

SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO KEITH COLE



Say the name **Keith Cole** and you can be quite sure of one of two reactions: immediate laughter or a painful cringe. The Toronto performer and filmmaker has a long history of being let's see... an *unpredictable character*. You never know what to expect from him. One friend of mine has a vivid memory of Cole at a party, crawling on all fours from crotch to crotch, just because.

This quality has sure made the fundraisers Sashimi and Sushi at Buddies In Bad Times Theatre interesting. By now everyone knows the scandalous details of Cole's Sushi hosting gig, where he insulted audience members with racial slurs and shocked the house by urinating on stage. That got everyone talking, and ended with an official letter of apology from Cole to the community at large.

His appearance in January at Sashimi fared no better. Although Cole was only brought in to do one quick little number, in doing so he yet again managed to offend some audience members, who accused Cole of being offensive to aboriginals. (Which is interesting, if only because Cole himself is of aboriginal descent.)

I've always wondered about Cole's take on these dramas, and given that he stars in a new reality TV show (*Canada's Worst Handyman* on the Discovery Channel beginning March 13th at 10pm), I thought this was an ideal time to invite him for tea and ask.



I want to thank you. You have been in my home for ten minutes and haven't urinated anywhere



(Laughs.) That you know of.



Let's start with why you are so controversial. Is it deliberate?



No. It's not like I plan it, or try to think of ways to get people angry or piss people off. I don't know. I was thinking about this the other day. When they had the Rolling Stones at the Super Bowl there was this huge uproar, and it's like: You've got the Rolling Stones! If you want something tame get Nelly Furtado. Or Amy Grant.



I think if we go back to Sushi, a lot of people were stunned by what happened, but then a lot of us fully knew that you have a ... talent for controversy. I remember I wrote about the incident in Xtra and pointed out that back when the Bata Shoe Museum opened you threw yourself down the stairs at a party attended by the blue rinse crowd.



Well it was kind of -



And not just once. You threw yourself down those stairs over and over and over. You just decided to throw yourself down the stairs.



Because it was this beautiful staircase. I used to live for years at Queen and Parliament and we had this long huge great staircase. And we used to throw ourselves down the stairs all the time. It was just something to do.



So when you came on stage at Sushi, your cock and balls were hanging out of your kimono. And that's a Keith Cole.



Yeah. *(Laughs.)* When I do drag I rarely do Church Street drag. Nobody believes I'm a woman, I'm not fooling anyone, I don't tuck – I have but it hurts. I just have my own way of doing it.



So what are your thoughts about the 'niggerish' comment you made at Sushi, or the 'surprise attack on Pearl Harbour' comment? A couple of racial comments.



I deal with a lot of racial stuff all the time. The way I look at it, racism, homophobia, sexism, size-ism, age-ism – all that stuff exists. And we're fools not to say that it doesn't exist. People are like, 'Oh, Toronto's this really great homophobia-free environment!' No, it's not.



I completely agree with that.



We live in a society that is all those things. So instead of pretending it doesn't exist, deal with it. But I think it's more shocking when people see one of their own is racist or sexist or homophobic or anything like that.



So what do you think is accomplished if you say 'you're getting all niggerish' or you introduce an Asian drag queen who wasn't on the bill the night of Sushi as like 'a surprise attack on Pearl Harbour'? What are you doing? What is the intent?



I think it's about stereotypes. There's reasons why stereotypes exist. This guy I know is Chinese and he says, 'I'm really good with computers because I'm Chinese'. That's racist, but you know what I mean?



Black men are hung.



It's out there, it exists, you just have to talk about it.



So you say you weren't being racist, *per se*.



With a lot of things I do, with a lot of films I make, I point out things people don't want to say, or don't want to talk about. When you put it out there in a larger way, people get really freaked out about it.



And no one is so perfect that they don't say these things in certain company, or think them. You just happen to be standing on stage, yelling them.



Yeah. I have no problem saying it or dealing with it or confronting it, because it exists. You're not helping people by denying it.



So fast-forward through *Sushi* and all of a sudden you are urinating on stage.



(Starts laughing.)



What were you doing?



That show was going on so long, I'd had a nightmarish day; I'd been there since noon -



Were you sober?



I was getting pretty drunk. I was fine; I knew what I was doing. But a friend of mine came backstage and he had a drink in his hand he said, 'This show is so long, can you please just kick it up?' And I was like, 'Thanks for letting me know'. And I thought, 'I'll just let 'er rip and see what happens.' But I did know what I was doing, it's not like I lost all control of my bodily functions. I knew exactly what I was doing.




And now: My urine!



I knew it was going to freak people out, and the odd thing is I didn't really think about it. I finished the show and went downstairs to the change room and the only thing I can remember is (drag queen) Lena Over came over and hit me on the head and was, like, 'You're an asshole!' and left.




What were the consequences of your actions? Besides the gay bowling league in the front row, never to be seen or heard from again.



It was nuts. Usually after I do a night of drag, I'm hung-over and my back's hurting me from high heels. I woke up and it was 9:30 and I thought, 'I'm not hung-over and my back's not sore – this is great!' I made some coffee, and looked at my phone and saw I had some voicemails. And I picked up the phone, and it was like: *You have twenty-seven new messages.* I thought, 'Oh! Who's called?'




Who had?



A couple from (organizer) Scott Cheslock, a couple from Buddies In Bad Times, the *Globe and Mail*, the *Star*, some newspaper from Brighton, England ... (*Laughing.*) ... CBC, George Strombopolous' show ... Calls just got more frantic from Scott and more frantic from Buddies. I never heard from any of those Fife House people directly, it was all third, fourth, fifth-hand news. I thought, 'If you don't have the guts to call me yourself...' And everything I was starting to hear was rumour and gossip and hearsay. So many stories came out of it: I was high on coke ... and I don't do drugs at all. And a lot of people had a lot to say about it who weren't even there.




Let's talk about your performance in Sashimi now. To clarify, you were asked back.



Scott asked me to come back. It's not like I called and said, 'Pleeeeeease let me in'. It's not like I need to do shows. It's not like I'm desperately trying to find something to do. I've got lots to do.




Describe what happened on stage from your point of view. What the act was, and why you did it.




I have this character, Pepper Highway. Kind of a stock character. And she tap dances and she's also a poet. I do really cheesy poetry as that character. So basically I go out there and do my thing, and then there's the tee shirt that everyone freaked out about, and also the wig, people freaked out about the wig.




Let me stop you. The tee shirt said 'Drinkin' Ain't Native' - and I said this in my column in Xtra - I read that as the same as a tee shirt that says 'Not all black people carry guns'.




Or not all Chinese people are computer geniuses, or not all Arabs are terrorists. I don't know if you ever go down to Queen and Bathurst, but so many people think that's the native world. Those awfully horribly drunk, sketched out people. I'm sure someone who'd never seen a native person before would think, 'Oh my God, that's what those people are all like.'




I got into an argument with a friend who was supportive of the people offended by your tee shirt. And I said, 'Tell me what is so offensive by that', and they couldn't. They said, 'I don't even understand the tee shirt. Someone explained it to me and I don't really get it. But I just think that it was still really inappropriate and offensive to aboriginals.' And I think that's what comes into play: people get all up in arms because we live in such a politically correct society, so we're not even quite sure why we're up in arms, but 'WE ARE JUST UP IN ARMS!'



(*Laughs.*) Because we're supposed to be.




Yeah. I can't articulate what offends me about this tee shirt, but this tee shirt is offensive. I think there's a lot of that with this. So what made you decide to do Pepper Highway tap dancing in that tee shirt to Eminem, and what was your point?



I love tap dancing to that piece. And if you listen to the song, 'Lose Yourself' it says you've got once chance and if you blow it, you blow it. That's what the whole song is about, giving it your best shot.




And was this routine an apology for the year before? A redemption?




No! Not at all. *(Laughs.)* Not at all.




And wasn't this performance vetted by Buddies and Scott before it went on stage?



Oh, yes. I've done it at Harbourfront, and been on the cover of the 'What's On' section of the *Toronto Star* as Pepper Highway. It's out there. And nobody complained.




I was covering Sashimi for OUT TV and ran into you backstage and you had that high that anyone who has done any kind of performing has when they're done and when it's gone well.




And I'd rehearsed it, and practiced it and it felt good to get it over with. Plus the stage was a little dodgy and there were parts I knew I couldn't step on and I'd been trying hard to concentrate so I wouldn't slip. So when I finished, I thought it'd gone so well.




And when did you hear people were upset, yet again.



I saw Scott, and he was like, 'There are two women who are bawling.' He told me what happened, and I thought, 'Oh for God's sake.'



Yet you survived another storm of controversy. And now you are in a reality show: *Canada's Worst Handyman*. What's the object of the game?




You're competing against yourself. You don't want that title. You're given all these tasks that are hard to do. We had to install toilets, install a sink, roofing, landscaping, ceiling fans, windows, shelving, flooring ...




This is my worst nightmare.



Doors, locks, countertops, wallpapering, painting, stucco on the ceiling ...



Did you hate it?



We never knew what the challenges were going to be. We'd have to go to these classrooms with these experts and they'd be like, 'Okay, today you're going to install a toilet!' I'm like, 'What?' We all had different skills and different skill levels. I really tried, and I really went for it. And having David Hawe there as my partner, he can do all that stuff. We had to learn about tools and and safety, because some of us had no experience.



Safety. Oy. I'd be handless.



Even though you look at it and think, 'This is impossible, I could never do this', it's actually not rocket science. You can actually figure it out. But unless you're inclined that way, it's really hard.



Did you get to win a prize?



I thought we'd at least be able to keep our tools. We had a healthy whack of tools. We'd thrown them around and dropped them a thousand times so I thought for sure we'd get them. And I had lesbians lined up for drills -



An excellent place to end, Keith. Let us not go to the dyke stereotypes.



(Laughs.) Good idea!