

Circus of Scars

The Jim Rose Side Show

Text **Katherine Turman**

He can read the future by looking at the sole of your shoe. Cure illness with psychic surgery. Tell how much change is in your pocket from 20 feet away. Or can he?

Actually, there are two things Jim Rose definitely can do—he can amaze and entertain an audience. As for the other stuff—ha!—mere tabloid fodder. No one is REALLY psychic, believes Rose. "A worldly fortune teller or psychic can give good advice and help you relax. I can do fortune telling; it's a formula," he furthers. "Every time you give an answer, they get more information. They cast a net and feed you info back."

In his creative new show, *The New Jim Rose Circus: Secrets of the Strange*, the barker with the silver tongue and heart of gold debunks popular myths such as mind-reading and hypnotism, co-mingled with odd physical feats from some of his freakiest side-show pals.

"I talk about the power of the mind and the delight we get from the unexpected. It's PT Barnum meets John Waters," the fast-talking Rose analogizes. "It's a warped seminar with a lot of everyone's favorite circus stunts."

The slim, 40-something Rose first came to national prominence with his *Jim Rose Circus Sideshow* act, which became a hit attraction at Lollapalooza '92. His "freak circus," filled with bug eaters, pierced-penis acrobats and more, struck a chord with disenfranchised youth. Tours with the likes of Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson followed, as did tons of press and television exposure, including roles on the *Simpsons*, daytime talk shows, and an episode of *The X-Files*.

Now, notes the ever-energetic performance artist, "whatever credit I get for a so-called freak fashion trend I'm hesitant to accept. There are a lot of people who aren't as professional and who don't understand the history of circus. It's merely a way to get attention, and I'm afraid a lot of them are getting hurt."

Rose also realizes that in the last several years, the odd has become mainstream. "Back when I first put the show together, thousands of people would come to see a guy who's pierced and tattooed. I was getting thrown in jail a lot in '91 and '92, but nowadays, all you have to do is click around on the television and you see that stuff. But the stunts are not hard to do," admits the man who hammers a nail up his nose as "the human blockhead."

"Anybody can do these. But there is a big element of danger, so if you don't go into it with historical precedent and with professionalism, you either cheapen the art form or get hurt."

His new *Secrets of the Strange* venture, currently on the road in the States, has been mulling around in Rose's active brain for years. "This is kind of like mysticism gets in bed with the devil's advocate. It's a psychological show about human behavior; a thriller," he explains. "I think



the real interest today is what's behind the greasepaint, what makes things tick."

What is behind Rose's role as "the human dartboard" and lying face-down in broken glass while an audience member stands on his back? Rose grins. "Anybody can have darts thrown at them and not feel it at all. There's a simple skin-toughening process. The person throwing the dart has to be an expert marksman." In this case, it's Rose's wife, the lovely Bebe the Circus Queen, so Rose had better hope they don't have a fight before the act.

As for the broken glass? It's all about knowledge. "Glass...it's made out of sand. Try to get it back to sand as much as possible before you do anything."

Knowledge is power, especially in Rose's career choice. "It's my job to know that everyone has had SuperGlue between their index finger and thumb for a fraction of a second and went 'Oh' before they were able to pull them apart. It's my job to know that if you have cavities, and I chew tin foil, it will creep you out. Fears, phobias, psychic surgery, brainwashing; these are things I enjoy," he says with a slightly demonic chuckle.

Yet Rose, raised in Phoenix, Arizona, before he embarked on the odd career that has taken his life and the world over, is not jaded or frustrated despite his expansive knowledge of mankind's foibles and gullibility.

"I guess..." Rose begins, speaking with uncharacteristic slowness. "I suppose I'm easily interested. It's been my survival. We all have to have a reason to wake up in the morning, and I have correctly or incorrectly convinced myself that around the next corner could be something amazing."

And though he may put razorblades down his throat and stick nails up his nose, the performance artist extraordinaire is not a risk-taker. No, seriously.

"I still look both ways on a one-way street when I'm crossing," Rose confesses, concluding. "Life's too short, and it's a hell of a lot shorter when you start taking chances." ☺