

Ginsberg revisited: Harrison gives a dizzying, powerful 'Howl'



Paul Fowler, left, and Teresa Harrison in square product theatre's stage adaptation of Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl." Photo by Marcin Mroz.

By **MARK COLLINS** for Daily Camera

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If you go

Three stars

What: square product theatre presents "Howl"

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays, through May 7

Where: Wesley Chapel, 1290 Folsom St., Boulder

Tickets: \$10-\$14 (two-for-one Thursdays)

Info: squareproducttheatre.org

Parents' guide: Sexual language

The next time I read a play in preparation for a review it will be the first. I could say I don't read plays before seeing them because I believe it would sully the purity of

experiencing a live event.

But the truth is, the reason I don't read them beforehand is because I just don't like reading plays. Plays are written to be read aloud while standing up and moving around.

In preparation to review the stage adaptation of Allen Ginsberg's poem "Howl," however, I re-read the 2,825-word ode to Ginsberg's dear friend Carl Solomon during halftime and timeouts of a basketball game in Highlands Ranch.

"Howl" and hoops in Highlands Ranch go together like mustard and chocolate ice cream, it turns out.

But, thankfully, just as plays are written to be put on their feet by breathing beings and spoken aloud, so too is some (much?) poetry. For certain, the ranting, raving "Howl" is.

Teresa Harrison is just the breathing being to howl Ginsberg's poem. In her performance, produced by Boulder's square product theatre, Harrison is part carnival barker, part bluesman, part ecstatic shaman. (She could play the lead in any future biopic of rocker poet Patti Smith, too.)

I've never been a fan of Ginsberg's poetry. But I think that was because I've confused it with Ginsberg the celeb literati — the man who drew stares as he drank coffee at the original Penny Lane coffee shop on Pearl Street, the hippie Buddhist caught on celluloid chanting frantically while tensions rose before the 1968 riots in Chicago, the poet whose rocking-back-and-forth delivery seemed disconnected from his words in a reading I saw in Boulder 25 years ago.

Now, thanks to Harrison, I think I get why "Howl" was strikingly ahead of its time, and a seminal moment in American poetry.

In a pre-poem diatribe, Harrison gives us some context by squeezing the poem in a verbal vice. Between the beginning of the Mayan civilization and the coming end to the Mayan calendar, between the Bolshevik Revolution and the "George Bush axis of evil," between World War II and Columbine, came "Howl."

(And is it not shocking that Ginsberg penned "Howl" in 1955, just a few months after "Leave it to Beaver" first appeared on television, and wasn't arrested or hunted down and shot for it?)

By the time Harrison speaks the memorable opening line, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness," the words are shifting through her body, shuttering, slinking, pulsating, flowing out of her.

The poem, rhythmically splashing with place, obscenity, religious and mundane

imagery, and glimpses of pain surrounding Ginsberg and Solomon's time in an asylum, bursts forward. The jazz that inspired the Beat poets and the Buddhism that inspired Ginsberg is there in the lines and in the spaces in between.

At one point, Harrison gives contemporary context to the piece with a whimsical interlude that finds her trying to connect with a lover (played by Paul Fowler, who provides excellent keyboard accompaniment for Harrison throughout the play) in online jargon.

The most impassioned moments come at the end during "Footnote to Howl," Ginsberg's "holy, holy, holy" poem that offers a soft antidote to "Howl's" raging bewilderment.

Ultimately, the performance is dizzying and powerful.

Curl up in your favorite chair and read some poetry if you like. But do yourself a favor and let Harrison do the work for you in "Howl."

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