

Los Angeles Times

CALENDAR

THEATER REVIEW

'Ecstasy and the Ice Queen'
recalls a painful Taos youthBy F. KATHLEEN FOLEY
Special to The Times

Compact and muscular, Justine Moore brims with such vitality that one would never suspect she endured an adolescence so painful she nearly committed suicide.

Moore credits her survival to her gal pals of that embattled period. A riveting glimpse of the teen psyche at its most anguished, "Ecstasy and the Ice Queen," Moore's autobiographical solo show at Elephant Stages, is dedicated to those old friends and also to young women today who are "quietly, almost secretly, saving each other."

Moore came of age in Taos, N.M., in the mid-1980s, when left-wingers of all stripes were pouring into the area, to the dismay of its indigenous Latino and Native American inhabitants, who deplored the newcomers' free and easy ways.

"Ecstasy" concerns the plight of Justine and her bright, beautiful best friend, Crystal, who bear the brunt of the violence in these "hippie wars" with little backup from their jet-setting parents. But then, brutality is nothing new to these young women. Crystal has been raped since childhood by her sadistic stepfather, while Justine has endured routine sexual molestation by a gang of school bullies.

Moore's piece, honed in collaboration with director-developer Frederick Johntz, is a searing indictment of Taos itself — a city with a rape rate 15 times that of Manhattan. That and other disquieting statistics are interjected into the story by Moore, who plays herself in the present day as she reflects on past events — musings that sometimes seem pat and interruptive in this otherwise seamless narrative.

That's a small quibble. Moore is impressively assured in her highly stylized, surprisingly comedic characterizations, especially of her female protagonists — impulsive young women who use drugs, including the designer drug Ecstasy, to dull their mental suffering.

Perceived as an indifferent "Ice Queen" by her peers, Justine simmers with self-loathing but is saved from disaster by the deceptively ditzy Crystal, an unlikely savior who emerges as a soaring heroine for our time.

Richly humane and beautifully performed, "Ecstasy" ends on a transcendent note that will floor you.



BRETT DORAN

ANGST: Justine Moore's solo show is about two teen girls.