

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

THEATER

A story about learning to trust

Justine Moore turns her danger-fraught youth in New Mexico into a revealing solo stage show.

By DON SHIRLEY
Times Staff Writer

“ABOUT four years ago, I had this seminal idea that the first night I took Ecstasy with my friend — she changed my life. She showed me you can trust people.” Justine Moore is recalling the genesis of “Ecstasy and the Ice Queen,” her solo show about her teenage years.

Although her words might sound a little stary-eyed, her show at the Promenade Playhouse in Santa Monica is no nostalgic wallow. Set in the New Mexico mountain town of Taos in 1986, it depicts her younger self (nicknamed “the Ice Queen”) as bitterly cynical and beset by sexual abuse at the hands of schoolyard bullies. Her character is best friends with a more outgoing but even more abused girl — a bond that proves to be life-saving at a wild “rager” that attracts most of the teenagers in town.

In the play’s running commentary, Moore, now 35, also talks about the racial tension that existed in a town that was heavily Latino and Native American, where Moore and the other white children of recent countercultural settlers were a sometimes scorned minority.

The white kids’ minority status is talked about more than dramatized, but Moore says she believes the references to it “show that these girls are even more isolated. The cops probably won’t help them. They really just have each other.”

The play’s autobiographical touches, however, don’t entirely reflect Moore’s experience during her youth. In some ways, real life was more traumatic.

Though Taos is Moore’s hometown, she lived away from it during most of her high school years, attending boarding

school in Colorado Springs, Colo. During her junior year, five of her Taos friends died in accidents — some of them drug- or alcohol-related.

Her friends’ deaths were “a huge wake-up call,” she says. She spent her senior year even farther from the turmoil of Taos, living with a family in Mexico City and attending the English-speaking American School Foundation there.

The incidents that make up the narrative for her show took place in Taos while she was home one summer. But the pivotal character of Crystal, her best friend, is a combination of two real-life friends, she says. She felt that some blurring of the stories was necessary to avoid being too specific about revealing other people’s pasts. Zoe Browning of Boulder, Colo., is one of the two.

For her part, Browning says she thinks that “five or six of us who were very close” and nicknamed “the hens” were combined into Crystal. “I could see a little part of each of us. She pulled from our collective consciousness very well.”

Although Moore fictionalized details, she and Browning say the rager depicted in the play was held at Browning’s house. Her parents were away for the weekend. When they returned, Browning reports, all they said was “Could you please take the beer cans out of the tree?”

Moore attended Arizona’s Prescott College, a small-town institution with a countercultural flavor somewhat akin to that of Taos. She emerged as a dancer after dropping environmental studies — “it was so much gloom and doom, I couldn’t take it.”

Returning to Taos after college, she worked for a year at Casa de Corazon, an institution for troubled teenagers. There, she observed that many of the girls adopted “a strained Little Miss Mary Sunshine act to mask their pain,” a quality that she imparted to her play’s Crystal.

She began performing monologues in Taos. One was a piece “about a woman coming down from a heroin trip talking to her dead mother.” Another was an autobiographically based performance about an abortion.

“My poor parents,” Moore says with a sigh. Yet her parents, who are depicted in “Ecstasy” as conducting spiritual tours in Greece while their daughter is getting into big trouble in Taos, never tried to censor her and donated money to the production. “Bless their cotton socks,” she says. “They have been so loving from Day One.” (The family connections don’t stop there. An older half-sister, Ashley McQuade, and her husband are the show’s co-producers.)

After pursuing graduate theater studies in Paris and Massachusetts and receiving a master’s degree from Columbia University in New York, Moore began developing “Ecstasy” four years ago while a member of the Theatre Tribe company in North Hollywood. Then she worked on

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LOOKING BACK: Justine Moore recalls her Taos, N.M., teen years at parties and “ragers” in “Ecstasy and the Ice Queen,” now being performed in Santa Monica.

it with director Frederick Johntz. “She’s a dream performer,” Johntz says. “She can embody this diverse variety of characters. Men, women, older, younger — you get them instantly. It’s technically very challenging.” Moore performed the in-progress show in Taos in December 2003 and found the local audience “so supportive and really touched.” Yet as she continued to research Taos for some of the narrator’s comments in the play, the Chamber of Commerce wasn’t quite as receptive when she showed up during regular hours and inquired

about Taos rape statistics. “They ushered me to the door and said, ‘We’re closed.’” Since the L.A. run began April 1, Moore’s play has received critical acclaim. It recently moved from Hollywood’s Elephant Theatre to the Promenade Playhouse — near the gym where Moore works as a personal trainer. In fact, she devised a barter arrangement with some of her gym clients, offering them some of her services in exchange for their help in marketing her play. “I get the best of both worlds,” she cracks. “They’re promoting my play, and I get to see them suffer.”

‘Ecstasy and the Ice Queen’

Where: Promenade Playhouse, 1404 Third Street Promenade, Santa Monica
When: 8 p.m. Saturdays, 7 p.m. Sundays. Dark July 2 and 3.
Ends: July 17
Price: \$20
Info: (323) 960-7846

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