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**INDEX**

- [Art](#)
- [Calendar](#)
- [Letters](#)
- [Movies](#)
- [Music](#)
- [Radio](#)
- [Television](#)
- [Theater](#)

**FEATURES**

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- [Today's News](#)
- [Local Columnists](#)
- [Community Listings](#)
- [Special Focus](#)
- [Classifieds Ads](#)

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FOR THE WEEK OF May 9 - May 15, 2002

[Previous](#) || [Home](#) || [Next](#)

## Palomar examines concept of 'queer' in interactive theater event

**PAM KRAGEN**  
Staff Writer

Queer (kwir) adj. 1. Differing from what is usual or ordinary; odd; singular; strange. 2. Slightly ill; qualmish or giddy. 3. Doubtful; suspicious. 4. Having quirks; eccentric; (slang) homosexual; term of contempt or derision.

No matter how you choose to define the word "queer," the connotations are always negative. At least that's what Michael Mufson found when he asked some 50 of his fellow faculty members and administrators and students at Palomar College last winter about the meaning of the controversial word.

Mufson, a theater professor at Palomar, recorded people's responses on what "queer" means and, with Palomar's artist-in-residence Peter Gach, has created an all-new interactive performance art experience that will debut May 11 and 12.

"(Un)Defining Queer" blends theater, music, dance, sculpture and projected imagery in an interactive event that examines the use of the word "queer," which has been used for centuries to describe homosexuals.

Although "(Un)Defining Queer" will have the same audience-interactive qualities as Mufson and Gach's previous collaboration, "Wireless City," Mufson said it is sharply different in style and content.

"At the end of 'Wireless City' last year, I was feeling very dehumanized," Mufson said of the bleak theater piece, which created a futuristic world where technology had replaced human interaction. "I wanted to do something that was in stark contrast,

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**"(Un)Defining Queer"**

**When: 8 p.m. May 11; 2 and 7 p.m. May 12**

**Where: Room D-5, Palomar College, 1140 W. Mission Road, San Marcos**

**Tickets: \$10, general; \$8, seniors; \$6, students (for mature audiences)**

**Info: (760) 744-1150, Ext. 2453**

going into a deeper human experience. There is a dark part of the journey (in 'Queer'), but we've worked hard to put a positive and hopeful emphasis on the piece."

The concept for "Queer" came to Mufson last year as the result of "SpeakOut," a program he put together to create on-campus conversations among the college's various faculties on issues of relevance. In 2001, the target issue was racism, and this year's issue is homosexuality.

"The gay and lesbian student group came and asked us to create something based on their experiences, and the seed was planted in my mind," Mufson said. "Several of my collaborators in 'Wireless City' were gay, and I thought we could create a way for them to be personally involved in a project."

So, armed with a miniature-disc recorder, Mufson hit the campus last November and began asking his interview subjects their response to the word "queer." When he was finished, he turned the disc over to music professor Madelyn Byrne, who composed a score that fuses computer music and traditional acoustic music with the recorded interviews. Computer art instructor Kitty Meek was invited to create computer art for slide projections, and then Mufson and Gach set to work on the body of the theatrical piece that will debut Saturday.

Mufson describes "(Un)Defining Queer" as part theater, part experience. Under Mufson's direction, a cast of nine actors will perform as Meek's artistic designs are projected onto the walls and Gach improvises on the organ to Byrne's score. "Queer" has a far more structured script than the free-form "Wireless City," but the audience will still be free to interact as much or as little with the performers as they wish.

The characters in the story are each on a personal journey, struggling with their own issues of self-identity and the identity imposed on them by the external world, Mufson said.

"In a lot of ways the piece is about language and how we use it to label and hurt ourselves and others, and how we can either take power away from language or empower our own language to overcome hurt," he said.

Mufson said the actors use storytelling techniques, choral speaking and gestures to identify themselves. "They have developed a vocabulary of gestures and physical actions to express the ideas and struggles the words cannot."

The individual actors have also each sculpted what Mufson calls

"queer chairs."

"Each actor's 'queer chair' represents the whole variety of their struggles," he said. "One chair depicts awareness and acceptance of male and female qualities in themselves, for example. Much of their movement involves working and dancing with their queer chairs."

Although the production deals intimately with homosexuality, it is not focused on sex.

"The play deals less with sexuality than you'd expect, but the problem is that people branded as queer are identified exclusively by their sexuality. That's one of the big problems in that with that one word we are reducing a complex human being simply to a label of their sexual activity."

"(Un)Defining Queer" will be presented on campus in Room D-5, which seats only 39 people, so reservations are strongly recommended. Mufson recommends the show for ages 16 and up and hopes to attract a broad audience.

"The nature of the show is not limited to a gay experience. It's very broad," he said. "We feel it's a unique event that everyone will learn from, and it's unlike anything you're likely to experience anywhere else."

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[webmaster@nctimes.com](mailto:webmaster@nctimes.com)

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[editor@nctimes.com](mailto:editor@nctimes.com)

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