

DATEBOOK

So you want to be a solo performer ...

Six tips from Ann Randolph:

1 Start with a question. I asked myself, "What surprises me most about my life right now?" and that led to the opening act of "Squeeze Box." The show begins, "I work the graveyard shift at a homeless shelter for mentally ill women. I make \$8.60 an hour. I work a job that nobody wants. When I want a day off there's nobody to cover me, so I don't take days off. If I quit tomorrow, I could probably get my job back the following day." I never wanted to write about my work at the shelter, but it persisted, so I knew I had to pay attention. I wrote about what I was going through, which was a complete crisis of faith.



2 Tell the truth, no matter how embarrassing it may be.

3 Don't think. Listen. I think that's probably the most important writing tool I have learned and that is to listen. Listen deeply. Don't try to think things up, but just listen to what wants to come through you.



Photos by KURT ROGERS / The Chronicle

Ann Randolph in her many guises (clockwise, from above): Kitty, the prostitute; getting into character as Kitty; transitioning back to Ann; Carol, the landlord.

No character this chameleon won't take on

By Chris Cadelago
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

The many faces of Ann Randolph have come to the Mission District. There's the neo-conservative landlord who questions the validity of art; there's the crack-addicted prostitute who walks Valencia Street in search of a fix and a trick; and there's the high-minded musicologist who pals around with a socially conscious hip-hop fanatic.

4 We inhabit many different roles/characters/selves.

Explore the contradictions among them. Lately, I've been playing with my inner crack whore, Kitty, and my inner neo-conservative landlord, Carol. They don't like each other. My new material focuses on Kitty's goal to get off the streets and live in Carol's apartment building. Carol refuses, but the city of Santa Monica demands that Carol accept Kitty. I explore the parts of myself that can identify with both Kitty and Carol. My new material focuses on my own contradictions in regard to my political, religious and cultural beliefs. I have both a born again and a brothel inside of me. These internal conflicts want resolution, and I write to find the truth.



5 Improvise on your feet and hit the streets. For my role as Kitty, I slip into a leopard mini, slap on some cherry lipstick and initiate conversations with strangers. I like to improvise to gather material, and Kitty has a big mouth and a sultry strut that stops people in their tracks. I like to engage people in conversation about the social and economic climate from the standpoint of a crack whore.

6 Find a producer/publisher who thinks your life is fascinating. I performed "Squeeze Box" for two years in small Los Angeles theaters before Mel Brooks and Anne Bancroft came to the show. I knew they were coming because my home phone number was the box office and they had left a reservation. The night I performed only 20 people were in the audience, but I could see Mel and Anne laughing. After, they came backstage and said they wanted to make a movie of the show and produce and finance it in New York City. I worked with them for the next year and a half rewriting and getting the show polished for an off-Broadway run in New York. It was a dream come true. I left the shelter after 10 years of working the graveyard shift.

E-mail Chris Cadelago at ccadelago@sfchronicle.com.