

## JOE RAIOLA IN "ALMOST OBSCENE"

By Kathryn Petrucci

**W**ho says there are no new frontiers? Joe Raiola is a pioneer if ever there was one — taking risks and following paths others wouldn't dare to.

This senior editor of MAD Magazine has written a piece of unflinchingly post 9-11 theater that combines satire and performance art with politics, war and religion.

Raiola confronts such conundrums as why monotheistic religions have longer holy books than polytheistic faiths. Seems counterintuitive, no?

Furthermore, as a student of religious history and long-time backpacker, Raiola has developed a theory: "You can't trust a verbose God." He favors the Chinese Tao (at 1.6 oz. he says, you can't beat it) over the Bible (weighing in at 3.5 lbs.).

Raiola performs "Almost Obscene" at 8 p.m. on Friday and Saturday at the Henry Miller Library in Big Sur as a benefit for the library.

"I'm just so damned excited about this," said the performer, who has set a goal to completely uncensor himself. "I mean, the Miller Library? If not there, where?" I can really give myself permission to let it all hang out."

On Miller, Raiola volunteered his thoughts. "I adore him. What happened to him is still shameful," he said, referring to the trial and 30-year U.S. ban on Miller's work for supposed obscenity.

"It's not a vulgar show," said the comedian of his own work. The show's title fools with the notion that, while the Federal Communications Commission has forbidden obscenity, they have not defined it. It also challenges the compromise of civil liberties since the tragedy of Sept. 11, 2001.

As already alluded to, one of the biggest hot buttons in the show is religion.

"The role that religion played in 9-11 and the role that religion has played in the Bush Administration," Raiola started. Its huge presence in current events made him decide to cut loose and run with the subject mostly shunned by comedians. "Whether you're religious or not you've got to deal with it."

And he's had people walk out on the show in liberal states such as Massachusetts and California. Raiola says it wasn't necessarily offensive material, but the subject matter alone that had them heading early to the parking lot.

He hopes "to get people thinking about things or seeing things in a way that they haven't seen them before."

Raiola began his writing career as part of a team spoofing magazines, putting out "Like a Rolling Stone," "Cosmoparody" and others. Soon after, he joined the staff of MAD Magazine, where he is currently senior editor, in addition to his duties as artistic director of the nonprofit Theatre Within.

He's toured extensively with "Joy of Censorship," his unique examination of the First Amendment.

"Almost Obscene" premiered at New York City's International Fringe Festival in 2002, just months after the attacks, striking a nerve with audiences. Positive reviews from The New York Times heralded national interest.

Reviewers have had trouble categorizing what Raiola does up there for an hour. It looks something like stand-up but without the one-liners.

"I think of myself as a storyteller," he said. "It's a combination of things. It's me."

Reminded of his intention to walk in the world wholly uncensored, Raiola muses momentarily. "It's a good challenge, isn't it, to be uncensored? It's tough."

"There's a lot of fear around that, around being honest," he said.

He doesn't advocate shedding all tact and telling your boss he's a jerk. He's after a more creative antithesis of censorship. "For an artist it's a calling; it's necessary. And of course that's what Miller did."