

# PLAYING FOR KEEPS

## John Kelly - Survival Is Center Stage

TOM MURRIN

Virtuoso singer/dancer/visual playwright John Kelly will also act as choreographer/director for his new work "Maybe It's Cold Outside," a piece about dreams and survival, premiering at the Kitchen February 13-24.

An artist of romantic extremes, Kelly describes the piece: "It's about my feelings considering survival—at the moment—in the midst of all the madness. The AIDS epidemic is an issue."

The setting: "It'll be five people, inhabitants of a strange kind of dormitory, which could be a hospital, an asylum, or even a beauty spa."

The dynamic: "It addresses their early personality development to some kind of maturity; and at some point there is a problem which affects one person directly and everybody else indirectly. It's about the possibility of apathy and avoidance to something when it's not affecting you directly."

In elaborating, Kelly states: "Most of my pieces have dealt with death in some way. I don't think that's strange because meditation on death allows you to focus on your life. But I think this epidemic is

forcing everybody to do this. After the death of a friend in '81 to AIDS I was dealing with it deliberately in my work."

Kelly's "Orpheus" piece (at DTW, '87) was "about going into the realm of death and returning, about dealing with loss in an aggressive way, about not being content to accept loss. Orpheus makes a deal with the gods." Ironically he adds, "It's a myth."

The Egon Schiele piece, "Pass the Blutwurst, Bitte" (at Inroads, '84 and DTW '86) was about "the artist as victim. Schiele died in the 1918 influenza epidemic at age 28. His wife died three days earlier, six months pregnant. Thousands died in that right after the war."

Kelly reasons: "Both plays deal with death. Is that weird? No—that's what's going on. I think that when you're dealing with death, you're dealing with your life, and so it's ultimately a positive thing, even if it's just appreciating the moment."

John Kelly is the Michael Jordan of performance artists. Each possesses an extraordinary talent and grace in his work that audience and peers alike recognize as something that sets them apart from the rest. As Annie Iobst of *Dancenoise* says:

"There are a lot of us out there performing, but John is the *artist*."

His background: "When I was a kid I was planning to be a painter, then I discovered ballet and I studied that for six years, and modern dance; and then I went to art school [Parsons School of Design] and then I quit and became a bohemian painter."

A sharp turn—"Then in 1979 I became a drag queen at the Anvil, the Mudd Club, Cafe Schmidt, and finally the Pyramid. On the night it opened [in '81] I did 'The Martyrdom of St. Sebastian.' I did a lot at the Pyramid, something different every week. I really hit my stride there."

### High Notes

Along with his dancing and his theater pieces, Kelly is known for his unusual singing characters. As "Mona Lisa," he appears in a gilt frame looking just like her. He does Joni Mitchell—"in my teens I was obsessed by her music"—and "Dagmar Onassis," whom he calls "my female alter ego."

Kelly's distinctive singing voice is a counter-tenor, i.e. a man's falsetto voice, his head voice. John explains, "Most counter-tenor music was originally written for castrati, who were a breed of singers who

flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries. They had their private parts altered before adolescence and that way they maintained the range of the boy soprano with the power of the male lungs. Also they had unbelievable flexibility in their voice.

But counter-tenors are *not* castrati."

I asked Kelly how he got to singing like that. He answered, "I started singing along with records, and it felt good to sing high, and originally in the club performances it was an extension of the drag esthetic. As I started to explore my male side more (in the Egon Schiele piece) I maintained the high singing voice because I thought it would be effective theatrically, and it was. Also that it would be unexpected. I'm not your usual male."

I asked him about his hand movements and gestures, which are so unique and distinct to his performances that when I once took a well-traveled female stripper to one of his performances, she told me she had never seen anything like them.

John said, "They're just natural. It comes from the music and my dance training. It's part of the mechanism. That's why I always use music and find so much in it." Kelly has used Mahler and Gluck, and Arvo Part—the Estonian composer whose music will be used in the new piece—is his first use of a modern composer.

Kelly says, "I don't have a favorite composer. I listen to all kinds of a music. I'm listening to a lot of baroque music now. I really want to work with a composer. Choreography, whether it's a hand moving or a body in the air, is movement to music. And it coexists with music or some sound—even silence functions as sound."

Along with music by Part, "Maybe It's Cold Outside" will include sections from Bellini's *La Somnambula*. Film sections are by Anthony Chase, set design is by Huck Snyder, and lighting design is by Stan Presser. Kelly's co-performers are Kyle deCamp, Marlene Menard, Byron Suber, and Vivian Trimble.

# THE KITCHEN

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John Kelly



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*Inset: From Down in the Mouth at Serious Fun, Lincoln Center*

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