

THE KITCHEN

Video Music Dance Performance Film Literature



WILLIAM MURRAY

Maybe It's Cold Outside: from school days to adulthood

By Alisa Solomon

Maybe It's Cold Outside

By John Kelly
The Kitchen

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"Tenero cor!" sings the cast of *Maybe It's Cold Outside* as its director, choreographer, and star, John Kelly, swoons to the stage in an aria of unrequited love. How can anyone witnessing Kelly's delicate, neurasthenic postures, or hearing his graceful countertenor glide over Bellini's self-dramatizing passages, fail to comment on his oh, so tender heart?

The aria, from "The Sleepwalker," comes two-thirds of the way through the wordless performance, which follows five friends as they progress somnambulistically from schooldays to adulthood. Deeply melancholy and entrancing, *Maybe It's Cold* is an elegy for the tender heart that becomes hardened with age.

The piece opens with playful scenes of the girls and boys, dressed in plaid jumpers or shorts and argyle socks, squirming, show-

Love Me Tender

ing, and hopscotching their way through elementary school. Then, in junior high, they roll over each other's bodies in a tentative, but giddily polymorphous, exploration of sexuality. Quickly, though, their games turn violent. Standing in a circle with their arms entwined, the five push and yank at each other, only to kick and strike anyone who breaks free of the group.

But the hostility that surfaces in the children, and the fears that drive those hostilities, are evoked most powerfully in their dreams—a black-and-white film (by Anthony Chase) that plays overhead while the actors wriggle in their beds, silhouetted behind

painted curtains. Using familiar—and therefore powerful—images of common nightmares, the camera takes us down litter-strewn alleys that lead nowhere, or shows us a dreamer pounding on door after door with no answer.

Other dream sequences show fantasies matter-of-factly: the dreamer opens a door to find an angel who sweeps him into an embrace; a couple dressed in Restoration frills and wigs toast each other and kiss. Yet whether frightening or consoling, all the dreams repeat small gestures or images of earlier—and, it turns out, future—scenes as we're drawn into that netherworld of sleep where childhood comes alive to stir present fears.

Early in the play, Kelly and Byron Suber prick each other's fingers and press them together to become blood brothers; later, in Kelly's dream, a doctor pricks his finger for a blood test and hands him a death sentence. Face painted in red, Kelly wanders onstage to sing that heart-wrenching Bellini.

From here the production becomes more frantic—and more

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literal—as it looks beyond a *Spring's Awakening*-like mourning for lost innocence to mourn the loss of life. Two actors twirl

manically while another rushes around, gathering up heaps of papers and watching as red tallies on the overhead screen—counting the dead, no doubt—accelerate. Meanwhile, two women—the star pupils in the school scenes—sit in the corner, chatting away obliviously.

AIDS, shrouded in mystifying, moralizing metaphors by government and mainstream media, has become almost impossible to represent on stage—even more so as the theater of AIDS has found such powerful expression in the streets. If Kelly can't stir up the rage of an ACT UP demo, or the focused grief of a memorial service, he does evoke a wide-reaching, almost unbearable sadness, finding, and touching, the tender places left in our hearts. ■

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