

The Tenderfoot Gang

By Burt Supree

ISHMAEL HOUSTON-JONES AND FRED HOLLAND. At the Kitchen (February 23 to 26). *Cowboys, Dreams, and Ladders*.

Ishmael Houston-Jones and Fred Holland's *Cowboys, Dreams, and Ladders* at the Kitchen had that amiable roominess that allows viewers to hook into what they like and let whatever doesn't especially grab them slide by. It's so easy, especially when the performers have such affability and charm. Collage is perhaps too formal a description for a conversational and apparently casual piece like *Cowboys*, which mingles child and grown-up imaginings (not so dissimilar) of cowboys and the frontier, with cozy, incidental humor of the everyday sort, with film of Urban Western Rodeo founder Carlos Foster and his horses in the Bronx and Foster speaking on a hard-to-hear tape, and with jumping and crawling, sliding and scrambling, grabbing and hanging-on movement for Houston-Jones and Holland, who set up one tangle after another with each other. And Yvonne Meier who slices into the piece in a diagonal beam of light somewhere past the middle of it, then settles in to complain about the deprivations of a cowgirl—she's got to wear a skirt, she doesn't get to wear cowboy boots, she doesn't get a rifle....

Holland has arranged the physical, visual setup at the Kitchen to be rather elegant and spacious. Its area seems to expand in sections going into the distance. The two pillars in the space divide the fore- and middleground. A screen of clear plastic sheets—upon which projections of bleary clouds, for instance, or a red crescent moon appear—shields the back of the space. But through the plastic

we can see two cowboys drinking and playing cards during much of the piece, and through doors in the wall behind the screen we see a cowboy, no, a cowperson, hanging. Throughout the room various objects are arranged or scattered: cutout cacti, ladders, a child's phonograph (maybe it's not a child's, but it's small and the sound is lousy), something that looks like tumbleweed made of barbed wire, but which I later think is made of grapevine, a chest, a wooden stepladder, a detour sawhorse topped with a yellow blinker, a refrigerator carton lying on its side. A cowboy sits sleeping with his hat tipped over his eyes. The phonograph plays "Turkey in the Straw," "Streets of Laredo," Lone Ranger music....

The refrigerator box crashes over. A man with rattling spurs and a rifle walks out, saunters over, and changes the record. Is it Glenn Ford? No, it's Holland. He pulls a tied-up body out of the carton, drags it across the floor, turns down the volume on the phonograph. He starts telling us about going to the toy store to buy a little windup cowboy and Indian on horseback: the cowboy scratches along in a semistraight line, the Indian drifts into a circle. Holland keeps winding them up and setting them on the floor, gabbing about returning them to the toy store. The Indian can't ride straight. "Maybe it's my attitude," says Holland. Houston-Jones, meantime, is the tied-up fellow squirming and struggling around on the floor. "At this point, I'm supposed to untie Ishmael," confides Holland, but he's more interested in trying the toys one more time. "I'm supposed to do it now," he repeats in a bit, "but I'm going to play a record." When he finally does release Houston-Jones, he doesn't make it easy.



Ishmael Houston-Jones and Fred Holland in *Cowboys*

He throws a knife into the floor. Houston-Jones, facing back, works his way to the upright blade. But just as he gets close, Holland says, "This is where he earns it," and pulls him back to where he started. Eventually, H-J inches back to the knife, and cuts his bonds to the beat of the music.

We've seen ourselves in all the cowboy roles, molded them to suit our own imaginations. But it's a cinch to feel affection for other people's versions, particularly when they favor antic grace over stiffness or brutality.

There are no secrets. Everything's laid out. "Up a hair with the crickets," says H-J and the sound is augmented. We're all friends here and we're all capable of going along with a fantasy. Next, there's gunfight practice with a pointed finger, then with a gun. H-J sticks it through his belt loop. On Main Street he'd be dead 63 times before he'd get it out.

H-J gets shot, and falls quivering in semiendless death throes with a coda for one foot vibrating hard against the floor. Then they dive to the floor for their guns

in beautiful, eloquent, ridiculous slow motion. Once is not enough. Holland is always fastest. He keeps shooting H-J but H-J doesn't die and keeps on coming. Holland whacks him with the rifle; H-J chokes Holland against the rifle barrel. Then Holland dives over Houston-Jones to start a jumping, falling, crashing, skittering-all-over fight.

While Holland runs around with his lariat, Houston-Jones chats about the research for the piece. Going to the Dance Collection at the Library and Museum of the Performing Arts and looking at a video of *Oklahoma* along with "a leather freak watching anything by Nureyev and a bunch of college kids watching *Pilobolus*." They were looking for videotapes of a black rodeo in Boley, Oklahoma. Instead, they learned that most Western movement for dance has to be done in second position plié to suggest riding a horse. We hear about H-J's experiences trying to ride Foster's horse, Santiago, while Holland fusses nervously doing little side-to-side stepping, shuffling moves. Seems the horse wasn't in any mood to

take on amateurs.

Then Meier enters—coiling, snapping, dipping to banjo music, within her narrowly defined path of light. She speeds up, twisting and falling and kicking and whipping every which way.

The beam fades, and H-J and Holland and Meier tune themselves together and apart in slow swiveling moves. The music of "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance" punches them into stronger and more dynamic movement—jumping, kicking, free-form crashing, with lots of rolling over and pretend dying. "Where's my spurs?" complains Meier afterwards. "Where's my hat." "How come I got no gun?" she grumbles in her German-accented English. "This is a sexist number," she decides. Then, lying on her back in the dark, she slowly sings "Red River Valley" in German. Even I can understand it. A little girl walks around lighting candles at tiny crèche-like stable-altars. A boy further away runs a small electric train around the usual oval track. H-J and Holland are making softly curling, dying movements. The lights in the altars gleam. Carlos Foster, on tape, is saying something very important about authority.

Authority? It's a word from another world. Lulled and tickled, I hardly know what it means. The warm personalities of the performers, their comfort within the loose structure of the dance, the merging of amusing, occasional details with the fancies of fictional history, the agreeable absence of anything really personal or touchy combined with the very potent intimacy of performers who've worked a lot together—all these give *Cowboys, Dreams, and Ladders* the translucent depth of a world you're not in a hurry to leave. Like diving to see the creatures of the reef, you've got to come up slowly when the air runs out. ■

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