

THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE FILM

512 West 19th St. (Btwn 10th & 11th Aves) New York, NY 10011

Reservations: 255-5793

NEWSDAY, Fri., April 13, 1990

THEATER REVIEWS

Finley's War of the Words

WE KEEP OUR VICTIMS READY. New York premiere of a solo work by performance artist Karen Finley. The Kitchen, Wednesday night. Performances continue Wednesday-Saturday through April 21.

By Joseph C. Koenenn

THE SYMBOLISM in Karen Finley's new monologue is as strong as the language: Jello stuffed into her bra to make her jiggle more seductively. Chocolate pudding scooped out of a heart-shaped Valentine's Day box and smeared on her nearly nude body. More signs of love in the dozens of tiny heart-shaped candies speckled over the chocolate. On top of that, bean sprouts that represent sperm. Then, the final touch, tinsel to make her look a little like a living Christmas tree.

These will all be linked in her monologue to the grievances she has against a male-dominated society that denies her any significant control of the body she's decorating.

The language is pure Finley: graphic, high-decibel words in noun, adjective and verb form that relate mostly to bodily functions. She delivers the words in fiery fashion, sometimes sounding like an angry avenger, sometimes like a scripture-quoting evangelist.

The talk of body functions and the use of food that keeps the body functioning are central to her main message: "It's my body. It's not Pepsi's body. It's not Nancy Reagan's body. It's not the Supreme Court's body. It's my body but it's never been mine. It's only for creating a baby with a man's name on it. If I use my name, it's a bastard, bastard, bastard, bastard . . ."

Repeatedly, and forcefully, Finley comes back to that point. She has other

grievances, though: art censorship, racism, insufficient efforts against AIDS. She invokes a familiar litany of devils: Jesse Helms, Cardinal O'Connor, George Bush, and adds a few unexpected ones — the Kennedy men, for what they did to Marilyn Monroe and Mary Jo Kopechne, and actor William Hurt.

"God and religion only perpetuate male fantasies," she says. "Instead of going to church, I walk past the sites in Central Park where women were raped and killed."

It is unfortunate that, in making her strong case to right wrongs, the accuracy of her reporting does not always match the fervor of her rhetoric. In one of her more extreme reaches for comparison, she equates the treatment of people with AIDS with Hitler's destruction of the Jews. "It's just that our ovens are at a slower speed. We keep our zealots ready; we keep our victims ready." In her catalog of racism she inserts the Tawana Brawley case, which, at best, is suspect.

Finley has become such a performance phenomenon that the line of reservation holders stretched a half-block from the door well before the scheduled 8:30 p.m. start of Wednesday's performance.

Often, Finley's comments drew audible agreement from the audience, part of the exchange that she encourages. Breaking her stride in her Jello-enhanced jiggling, she ad-libbed: "I thought it was kind of funny, too."

Her ad-libs have a sweet and innocent tone, in contrast to her performance voice. But make no mistake. As she announces near the beginning: "This is not going to be made into an HBO special." ■■■