

THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE FILM

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

Reservations: 255-5793

Swimming to Grover's Corners

BY ALISA SOLOMON

THE THEORY OF TOTAL BLAME. A play written and directed by Karen Finley, presented at the Kitchen (closed).

Fifty years after *Our Town*, the American theater, being American, remains preoccupied with the family. These days, that national obsession has become grotesque. The Bush campaign won by exalting Mom and Dad and "the little brown ones"; meanwhile the demon eyes of Joel Steinberg glare out at us daily from the tabloid covers. The phony ideal and its all-too-real perversion are, of course, two faces of the same bad penny. Bush's refusal to fit such notions as decent day care and housing into his fantasy of family is the flip side of the the evening news's failure to see the Steinberg case in the context of a violently sexist culture.

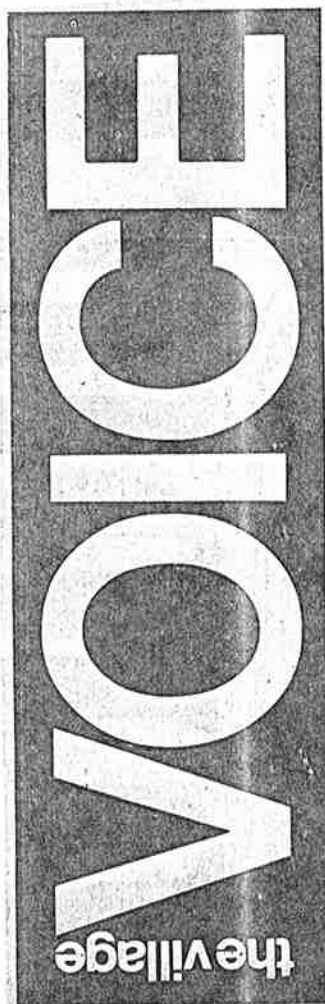
In the same way, Karen Finley's *The Theory of Total Blame* inverts the image of *Our Town* but shares the premise that the family is a hermetic, emotional unit, independent of social or political structures. In her first full-length play, Finley presents her version of the Typical American Family at Christmas: the father, who had committed incest with the daughter, killed himself some time ago (the clumsy exposition explains). All the kids, naturally, blame their alcoholic mother (played by Finley) and, to some degree, themselves. Of course, all are nutcases: one son is comatose, another has been in meditation cults for 10 years, the third is an emotionally stunted reject from the army, and so on. For 70 minutes they scream at each other, taking turns at crying about how they need love and flinging recriminations at their mother.

For her part, Mom yells to her daughter to "get out of my fucking house." She tells her son he doesn't eat red meat because "that's a safe way of getting out of eating live, bleeding pussy." She removes her panties and fans her crotch with her skirt when her kids tell her she stinks, and serves jello molds by digging them out of the pan with her fingers and slopping the slimy gook onto a platter.

Clearly Finley wants to say something about the debasement of the family and to show how we revert to stuck, childish roles when we return to our homes as adults, but her playwriting matches the mother's kitsch cuisine: crude and shapeless. Her characters shout out rhetorical declarations, but there is no dramatic action—a pity, since Finley has chosen such a conventional dramatic form. She seems to have missed the fundamental point that simply to depict a disgusting situation is not to offer a critique of it. The writing vomits up contempt and does not transform it into an experience

that provides any insight, so what ought to be excruciating about this family is, instead, oddly banal.

Finley ends the play with one of her trancelike monologues. Keening in a chair, she speaks of being a black sheep, an artist her parents and siblings could never understand. Though these final few minutes take on a power that is lacking in the rest of the performance, the material drowns in self-pity and strikes some offensive notes. "Some sheep are chosen to be sick," she says, referring, no doubt, to AIDS, "so families can finally come together and say, 'I love you.'" So much for inverting Bush's image of America. ■



VOL. XXXIII No. 50 • THE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER OF NEW YORK • DECEMBER 13, 1988 •