How It Feels to Be in Jail

By BERNARD HOLLAND

"The 'Empty Chair' — played Saturday evening at the Kitchen — is a mixed-media piece by G.E. Lewis that through television, computer-generated music and live performers instructs the audience on the experience of being in jail. Its center is a long and 'intermittent soliloquy' by Bernard Mixon. Mr. Mixon, in a resonant, bass narrative style, describes the protagonist's youth in Southern black America, his college education in Northern schools, his idealism gone awry and his current status as penitentiary prisoner.

His partner on stage is Douglas Ewart in a costume of colorful streamers and a transparent mask. Mr. Ewart evokes African roots with his wooden flute and rattles and more modern permutations of the black experience through his surrealistic attacks on the saxophone.

Surrounding these two flesh-and-blood presences are television screens of varying sizes. Prepared tape comments on Mr. Mixon's plight. Sequences of caged chickens housed in a vast mega-farm are the most effective. Scenes of country roads (leading, one presumes, to freedom), idyllic picnics, chained hands, and groupings of disembodied hands flapping like wings make their point but less subtly.

Most of the television viewing, however, is firsthand. Roaming cameras catch various aspects and details of the performance on stage and present them on screen as they are happening.

The principal strengths of "The Empty Chair," I think, in its unadorned ingredients — the presence of Mr. Mixon and Mr. Ewart. The technological enhancements may benefit from their quasi-improvisatory nature, but they also suffer from them. The images are simply not interesting or sophisticated enough to compel our attention — either for themselves or for anything they might add to what these two performers are doing. Spontaneity lacking, the spark of invention has a way of working against itself.

Mr. Lewis, Don Ritter and Ray Edgar were at the computer controls. The camera operators were Stella Ververis and Daniela Zehnder.