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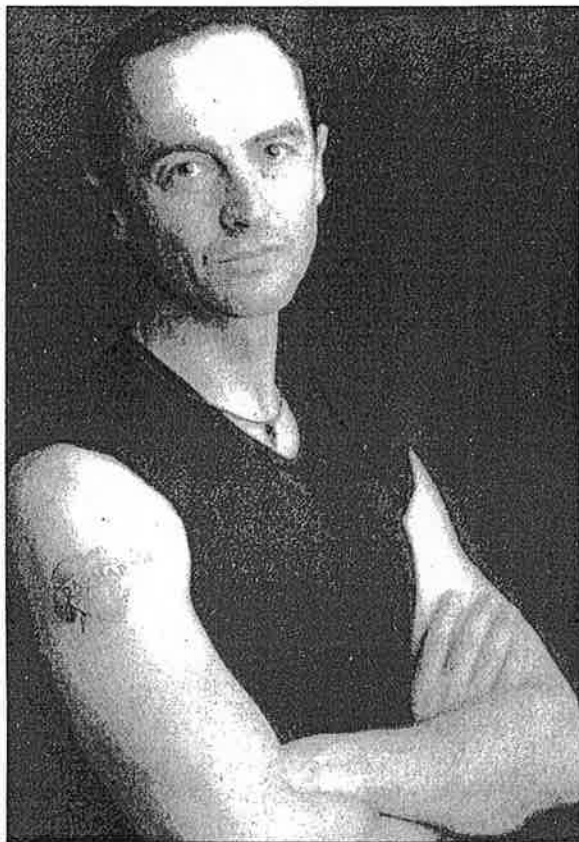
Divine Provenance

Performance artist John Kelly is cooking up *Paradise* at the Kitchen

BY EMILY HARNEY

In his autobiography published last year, John Kelly chronicled his 20-plus years as a choreographer and experimental theater artist. In the book he begins with a sentence pulled from his 1992 solo *Divine Promiscue*. "I long to lose control, but I crave to give form." At once open and experimental, yet specific and precise, the statement describes well so much of the performance artist's work.

Over the years Kelly has artfully illustrated the lives of Austrian painter Egon Schiele, modern dance choreographer Pina Bausch, a young East German graffiti artist named Waldemar Dix, Alessandro Modesti an Italian castrato, and most famously, singer Joni Mitchell. Not content to merely adopt one persona as a constant alter ego, Kelly takes a new character



■ **EXQUISITE CORPSE** John Kelly in *The Paradise Project*.

THE PARADISE PROJECT

By John Kelly
The Kitchen
September 12-28, 2002

with almost every project. Each embodiment, whether true historically or entirely fictional, is finely crafted through imitation and sweet emulation. His performances are filled with wonder and understanding.

"If I love something enough," he says, "I feel compelled to inhabit it completely, to fathom it with my eyes and brain, my heart and gut."

The personas chosen by Kelly are therefore characters from which he feels he has some-

thing to learn and in this way the performance returns to the realm of the personal instead of merely existing as history lesson; and the audience learns along with Kelly. Moreover, often it is the movement between personas, the negotiation of multiple identities that is

of particular interest. To the forefront rushes the question of how we define ourselves; is there any other mode of being than performance? Is anything he shows us real?

Audiences will get another chance to ask when he, along with collaborators Michael

Torke (composer) and Mark Campbell (librettist), presents the first installment Kelly's newest work, *The Paradise Project*, at The Kitchen, September 12-28. The piece explores Kelly's relationship to Marcel Carne's 1945 French film classic *Les Enfants du Paradis* (Children of Paradise). The work blends movement, digital technology, and theatrical illusion.

Whatever form Kelly employs to give shape to his explorations is strongly rooted in his visual art and dance backgrounds, as well as his incredibly moving singing voice. A talented visual artist, at the age of 17 Kelly

there that he finally began to pull his interests together and make use of his varying talents and training. One seminal performance took place in 1982 at the Pyramid Club; Kelly entered the club crawling on the floor between the legs of club-goers, making his way to the small stage on which there was a microphone. The terrible, base passage to the stage, a metaphor for his fear of singing, vanquished as he stood up and belted a few beautiful notes.

Kelly does not usually speak in his performances, and refers to his work as non-verbal the-

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switched mediums and began rigorously studying dance. After high school in New Jersey he commuted to New York to study at the American Ballet Theatre School, while simultaneously studying art in college to satisfy his parents. During the following years he explored a great deal of the dance and art scenes in the city, eventually becoming overwhelmed by the dedication and passion each one seemed to require. He abruptly quit dancing and returned to art school full time, saying that dance was taking too much and not giving enough in return.

A few years later he returned to performing, starting out in East Village nightclubs. It was

atre, but singing is almost always utilized as a dramatic tool, another skilled use of the body and breath to explore a role. In some of his more recent work, singing has become even more central—the songs themselves are characters and the visual and performative representation of the song more abstract.

Kelly rips holes in existing definitions of dance or theater. By moving into and fully using each space or genre, he finds a way to demonstrate a new kind of performance. About his choices in style and method, he has said that there are no new things to say, what matters is how you say it.