

# SILENCE = LIFE

## JOHN KELLY REPRESENTS IN MIME

John Kelly first saw the classic French film *Children of Paradise* in the late '70s, while studying visual art at Parsons. He had already retired from the stage. • The ballet career just wasn't going to work. He'd won a scholarship to the American Ballet Theatre's school at age 17 and studied there for two years, but he was fully grown when he started, too late to mold his body for the postures required in classical dance. He realized that he would never get out of the corps. By the time he quit dancing—abruptly leaving class one

day never to return—he was an aesthete whose knowledge of the arts was still limited. He'd come to ballet, after all, through the imperfect vehicle of *The Ed Sullivan Show*—Galina Ulanova in "The Dying Swan," seen when he was 12. Then Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn on Channel 11. And "where I come from, you were loath to mention the word ballet." That would be Jersey City.

It's possible to speculate that John Kelly went on to his unique and original career because he had no guidance, no path to follow, and had to track his own muse so assiduously.

*Children of Paradise* opened another world to him. For one thing, Kelly had never before seen a Pierrot, a character he was born to inhabit though he didn't quite know it yet. Set in the 1828 Paris demimonde, the film tells the story of a mime named Baptiste and the woman he loves, Garance. She is pursued by three other men as well. So Baptiste uses his unrequited love as material for his wildly popular pantomimes at the Theater Funambules. He's a classic Pierrot figure, a silent melancholy clown dressed in baggy white.

Kelly watched *Children of Paradise* that first time, he says, "in a big tsunami wave of dread and wonder. I literally went home and cut up a sheet and made the costume." He thought that he resembled Jean-Louis Barrault, the great French mime who played Baptiste. "It was that, and it was just some kind of identification," Kelly recalls. "It was French culture, it was the language, it was the period, it was that wonderful backstage world, the magic of being a performer, of being onstage, hitting your stride onstage and not hitting your stride in life—all those things."

His new piece, *The Paradise Project* (September 12 through 28 at the Kitchen), re-creates that moment of discovery. Kelly plays an artist disenchanting with his life, who becomes obsessed with the film and eventually disappears into it.

• If seeing the film pushed Kelly to cut up a bedsheet, it didn't actually propel him onto a stage. It was a year or two later, while sketching at the Anvil one night, that he saw Tanya Ransom and said to himself, "My God, that's where I need to go." Ransom was a drag queen with attitude, lip-synching to pop ban-

shee Nina Hagen. "Wailing," Kelly remembers. Soon after, Kelly began lip-synching, in drag, to Maria Callas and the Buzzcocks. "It became a way to do a silent scream," he says. "I had a lot of rage. Jersey City. All the male expectations. It was 1979, 1980, and drag was still kind of a big fuck-you." Kelly's drag

**KELLY AS A PIERROT: HE HAS ALWAYS EXPLORED PARTS OF HIMSELF MEN ARE NOT ENCOURAGED TO EXPLORE.**

persona, Dagmar Onassis, "the love child of Maria Callas and Aristotle Onassis," was a little bit punk and all diva. Soon he began singing the Callas arias for real.

Kelly, or Dagmar, became a regular at the brand-new Pyramid Club in 1981, performing there two or three times a week. The beauty of the East Village club scene was that it had no rules. No one said, "You have no vocal training," or "You need a director." It was one big performance boot camp, and another good place to follow the muse, since there was no one else to follow.

What Kelly developed in the clubs and then in his theater pieces was art about art, based on characters he could only know through film, recordings, or art history: Egon Schiele, Cesare from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the transvestite trapeze artist Barbette, Orpheus remade as a Depression-era radio crooner. It was not deconstruction, or parody. He showed how one could work with artifice to get to genuine emotional intensity. It's as if he wanted to inhabit these other artistic lives to experience and re-present their epiphanies. And he got to this state of heightened emotion through singing, or movement.

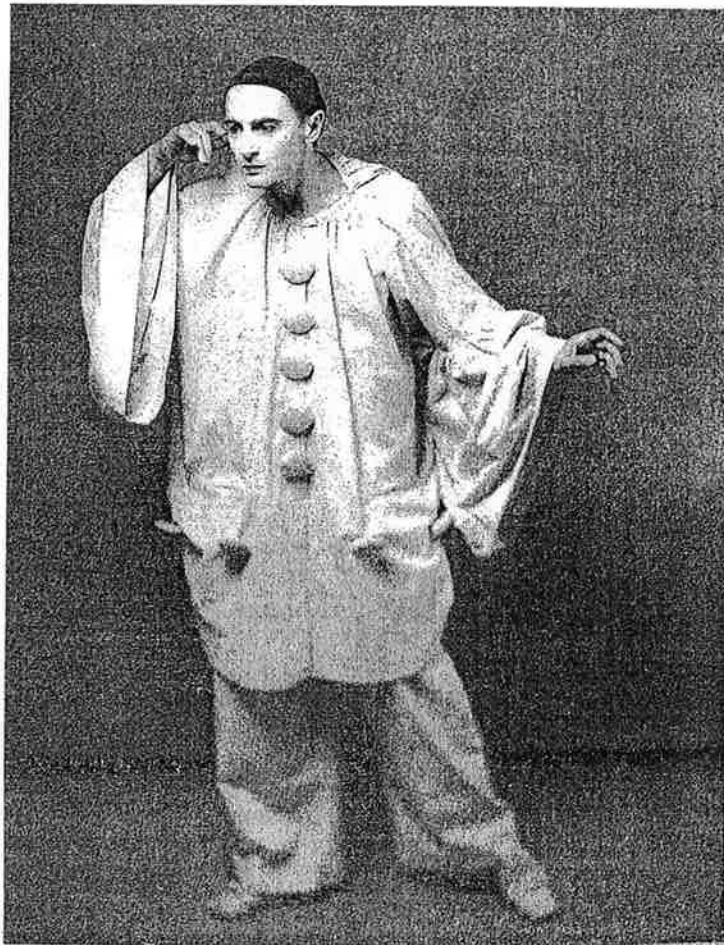
Until 1992, he did not speak on the stage. Well, maybe a word or two. But he was not really comfortable with what he calls "the theater of speaking" until 2001, when he performed on Broadway in *James Joyce's the Dead*. Kelly took a circuitous route back to Pierrot. In *Moon drunk* (1998), he donned the baggy whites for a staged version of Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*. But I've seen glimpses of the character for years in some of his other work. That probably has to do with the way in which Kelly has always explored parts of himself men are not encouraged to explore—the quiet parts, the grace, nuance, and soul.

That's what Baptiste has. We know it from the moment he comes into view on the barker's stage outside the Funambules, along the teeming Boulevard of Crime. In his floppy hat, whiteface, and pantaloons, he is being ridiculed—"a dope, retarded"—by the barker, his own father. But Baptiste (as played by Barrault) has a presence that leaps off the screen. Garance is in the crowd. When someone accuses her of picking a pocket, Baptiste re-creates for the police, in mime, what really happened. His first brilliant performance. As Kelly puts it, "It's like he's speaking but it's better than speaking."

• Kelly is largely self-trained, but gets what he needs to keep following the muse. In 1996, he went to Paris to study mime at the Théâtre d'Ange Fou, set up by Etienne Decroux, the man who played the barker in *Children of Paradise*. Decroux and Barrault developed what they called corporeal mime. Kelly compares it to method acting, as opposed to, say, Marcel Marceau's illusionistic mime. Kelly remembers seeing Marceau on television as a kid. "Didn't blow me away." So he went to study at Decroux's theater on a grant from the French government, only to learn that the theater had moved to London. He found some other teachers, but suggests modestly that what he's doing as Baptiste may be "mimicry."

The piece had a trapeze in it until last spring, when Kelly fell in rehearsal, fracturing two vertebrae in his neck. Multiple fractures, in fact. But no nerve damage. So the trapeze is gone, but ironically enough for a piece about a silent performer, there is a great deal of talking. At least for a Kelly piece. It is just a further expansion of his range.

Kelly explains: "This piece is about the contrast between giving yourself over to work or giving yourself over to a life—which could include love. And does it have to be one or the other? Can't it be both?" ▮



JOHN DUGDALE