

DANCE

Preview

This side of *Paradise*

John Kelly recovers from a devastating accident to stage a French tale of love and loss **By Gia Kourlas**

John Kelly was first seduced by Marcel Carné's 1945 French film *Children of Paradise* after he temporarily stopped dancing in the mid '70s to study at Parsons School of Design. Created under Nazi censorship during the occupation, the epic film relates the story of a doomed romance between evasive, glamorous Garance (Arletty) and the troubled mime Baptiste (Jean-Louis Barrault).

"It was an amazing and strange experience because, at that point, I thought I had left theater," Kelly recalls. "I went home and cut up my sheets and made a costume and wore it to a big artists' ball. Eventually, I started modeling for drawing classes. That was, in retrospect, a sneaky way of getting back in front of people. I didn't start performing until a few years later, in 1979—I used to go to clubs and sketch, and I saw this performer in punk drag, lip-synching Nina Hagen. That was what got me to go back onstage."

The idea to adapt Carné's film was brewing in Kelly's mind even then. But what he ultimately created—an hour-long piece, *The Paradise Project*, which will be performed at the Kitchen beginning Thursday 12—doesn't merely follow the movie's plot. Instead, Kelly portrays a discontented New York artist who becomes so obsessed with Carné's film that his reality is skewed and he is transformed into Baptiste.

That Kelly—a Bessie- and Obie-winning director who glides among the worlds of performance art, theater and dance with ease—is performing *Paradise Project* at all is a feat. Originally scheduled to premiere last spring, the show was canceled after Kelly fell from a trapeze and suffered multiple fractures in his fourth and sixth vertebrae. "I was doing a monkey roll into an



MIME'S THE WORD Kelly shows off his Baptiste.

ankle drop, where you hang by your knees upside-down, grab the ropes from behind, pivot around and throw your torso backward into space and catch yourself with your ankles," he says. "I didn't catch myself. It was a Friday at 6pm, there were kids around, and it was noisy. I just had a lapse in concentration."

After 15 hours in the emergency room, Kelly, fitted in a neck brace, was deemed stable enough to return home. The miracle was that he had no nerve damage. "I had been using a ten-inch crash pad, as opposed to the two-inch pad I would have been using onstage," he says. "I was never really scared, but it was a shock—big time."

The format of *Paradise Project* hasn't changed drastically since its original incarnation; however, the dream trapeze sequence that Kelly envisioned ending the work—it was to symbolize a man floating in space—has been transferred to a sequence of floor movements.

"The initial idea was to dramatically have Baptiste isolated from Garance and from his life," Kelly says. "It was going to become a cinematic close-up of him writhing and contorting in the air until, out of desperation, he jumps down from the trapeze, which would have been about eight feet in the air, and crashes through a movie screen. What we have now is on the ground—and I think it's going to be fine. I try to look at everything as a message. I'm so lucky to have survived this accident in one piece. I was not at all worried about finding an alternative. I can do it without the danger."

In any case, the mime component, more than any special effect a trapeze section would have produced, lends *Paradise Project* an undeniable eeriness. Even without the requisite white makeup, Kelly uncannily resembles the catlike Barrault, who was also an accomplished mime. But for Kelly, who briefly studied the form in Paris in 1996, his rendition is a combination of rudimentary knowledge and mimicry. "The mime I'm doing is instinctual," he says. Kelly, however, is clearly irritated with two preview stories that have run in *The Village Voice* and *Out*, in which the art

form itself is dismissed outright.

"In each, they take the word *mime* and put it in quotes, cynically and condescendingly," he says. "Yeah, there are a lot of people who have given mime a bad name. And there are a lot of bad performance artists who have given performance art a bad name, and if that's your only experience with this stuff, thanks for sharing. If you want to set up another hurdle for me to jump over, fine. I'd like to do it and prove you wrong."

But he knows he has less at stake with the mime sequences than he does concerning the ramifications of transferring such a treasured film to the stage. "This film is a famous piece of art—people have a sense of ownership about it," he says. "So I'm curious to see how they respond."

The *Paradise Project* is at the Kitchen Thursday 12 through September 28.