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PERFORMANCE ART

Comedy in the Raw



Finley's new group piece, 'The Theory of Total Blame,' opens at The Kitchen Wednesday.

Karen Finley isn't trying to please, and she doesn't play to standard assumptions. If this is comedy, it's comedy of the catastrophic kind: It hurts while it heals.

By Joseph C. Koenenn

KAREN FINLEY has been called the female Lenny Bruce and that bothers her. It's not that she objects to the comparison; it is that no one ever thinks of turning those comparisons around — of calling a man, for instance, the male Phyllis Diller.

"A woman still has to be compared with male artists because, I think, unconsciously our society does not want to give a position to a female that a male might be able to have, and that is something I want to expose," Finley said quietly as she sipped coffee her Nyack apartment.

She exposes that inequity and some of society's other ills in high-voltage, high-decibel performance that is capable of shocking the unprepared and rousing the unconcerned. The language is raw, full of words and phrases that speak bluntly of bodily functions. The imagery is usually of anal or oral sex, with Finley often assuming a male role.

Appearing at Lincoln Center's "Serious Fun" festival last summer — one of several recent indications of her growing prominence as a performance artist — she planted her feet firmly on stage with imitation machismo. She swaggered, spit and let loose a barrage of sound unmatched among today's monologists. In some of her appearances, she has smeared food on her body; in others, she has performed feats that defy delicate description.

Finley has been performing since 1979, mostly as a solo act, but she has prepared a new group piece, "The Theory of Total Blame," which she and five other actors will introduce to New York Wednesday through Saturday at the Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St.

The play can be viewed as either a black comedy or an American tragedy, she said. "It tries to show how people are stuck in emotional time in their family life. When people go back to their families they still revert to certain dynamics that they were taught as a child."

"The Theory of Total Blame" is centered on a family in which the father commits suicide, as Finley's did in 1979. It is not strictly autobiographical, she said, but might be viewed as influenced by her life much as Tennessee Williams' plays were colored by his.

This new piece represents a move by Finley more in the direction of theater, albeit unconventional theater. "I think audiences that go to traditional theater aren't used to people starting over, which I do many times in my plays. They are not used to the fact that if someone has an epileptic seizure we stop the show and

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Finley's Comedy in the Raw

we'll see how the person is, or if the lights aren't going right, we wait.

"In my work, it's life that goes on, not the show goes on."

Finley uses language on many levels. "On my first level, is the fact that language is free and cheap and anyone from any economic class can use it. I think that's the reason why my work is so threatening. I can really affect people's political ideas and emotional foundations."

On another level, she said, language is a lethal weapon, most often aimed at women. "When I'm walking with a man, I'm viewed as his property, but when I walk alone, I am immediately looked at as open property. Whenever I am in a subway or whatever, I have to constantly be very protective about my body."

Women will never be considered truly equal to men, she said, until they are no longer looked at as their property or as objects of desire subject to verbal abuse. "That's why I kind of reverse the situation, by taking on the male voice" in some of her pieces, she said.

Although her monologues are suffused with sexual references, there is much more to them than that. "The Constant State of Desire," for example, deals with rampant consumerism even if it is voiced in the graphic words of insatiable sexuality.

"A society that is based on sensation, on consumerism, is always faced with dissatisfaction, and that is the basis of our entire political society: that we are never to stay satisfied."

In contrast to her agitated, aggressive performance style, Finley offstage is soft-spoken, with a strong flavor of her Chicago background in her accent. She is unfailingly polite, and generous with smiles. Her conversation is G-rated, although she says that her stage language is not that different from what is heard in most families today.

"I think when someone is mad, they don't yell, 'Oh, glass of milk.'"

"Also, I want to show the perversion of our language today, which is that whenever we're mad we always use body parts to express it. Or that we use the most beautiful act of love to describe the deepest, most grievous points in our life . . . I think after a while of listening to those words, they lose their taboo factor."

Finley, who is 32 now, first noticed the injustices

that still concern her when she realized she couldn't be an altar boy. Her apartment is full of statues, many of them of saints. She loves that part of her Catholic tradition, she said.

What she doesn't like is "the political idea in religion, the fact that God is a man. Pope John Paul likes to make us think that in order to get God to talk to you, you have to be a man."

A similar attitude infects the secular world. "No female artists will ever be able to do work that is primarily esthetic until the oppressive conditions of women in the arts are removed. How can I follow in the tradition of theater, art, performance or music when I've never been included or accepted?"

In the visual arts, she said, fewer than 10 percent of the recognized artists are women. In college, none of her teachers were women. In music, women are permitted only as solo artists, she said. "They don't want women working as groups, because then they'd become more powerful and be able to exercise their rights."

THE ONLY thing that women are accepted in is being the emotional paste to society or being objects of desire."

As a visual artist — her paintings in vibrant, primary colors also compete for space in her apartment — she resents the fact that she has trouble finding a gallery.

But she is becoming an increasingly recognized leader in the avant garde. For about two years now, she has made a living with her performances.

After the engagement at the Kitchen, she is going to Dusseldorf in an artistic exchange between Germany and the United States. Later, she will be part of a New York music festival in Rotterdam's opera house. There will also be some club dates in Paris.

She is also becoming a recording artist, with an album, "The Truth Is Hard to Swallow," out on the Pow-Wow International label and she has a book of monologues and poetry due for publication next year.

A listener to a Karen Finley recording or performance would probably assume that she harbors a lot of anger. No, she said, "not necessarily anger, but sensitivity to the oppression of people. Anger toward all of that, anger in a positive way."

"I'm not a negative person, but one who goes into every situation to see what's wrong with it before I see what's right with it. I like to get past the smiling face and see the rotting soul underneath." / 11