

'Tenement Lover' Cooks at the Kitchen

BY CHARLES FREDERICK

One thing that's certain: there will be plenty of energy to cook with at the Kitchen on April 24 and 25 when Jessica Hagedorn sings, dances, and generally carries-on in her new performance piece, "Tenement Lover." She will be appearing with two other performers and with her rock and roll band, the Gangster Choir, under the direction of Thulani Davis.

This Jessica Hagedorn is "one busy woman, and has been for a long time—busy writing and performing poetry, busy writing and performing music. There is not a lot of difference for Jessica between poetry and music, and as a matter of fact, between performing any one kind of thing and performing any other kind of thing.

Jessica is running a writing workshop at the Poetry Project at St. Marks Church Sunday afternoons at four, getting other people busy writing their own poetry. She is just generally busy living, because also for her there is not a lot of difference between being busy living and being busy making art.

FIGHTING THE 'ARTY'

Careful about that last word, "art" . . . Jessica expressly told me that in her piece coming up at the Kitchen, she is "fighting people's concept of what's arty." So, if I use the word "art," it's because I think of Jessica as a companion with another democratic, hyperactive soul, Walt Whitman.

Art for her is taking a lot of serious joy in what's out there (and serious anger, too . . . not all that's out there is good, and Jessica is very concerned with that fact). Then the job is to get it down in some form, to get it to the point of telling other people what you have seen, heard and felt—to be as clear and

direct as you can, but with just enough of a jolt in rhythms and unholy juxtapositions of images and feelings so people will understand and remember what you said.

Whitman tried to talk clearly, and he broke with the academic fol-de-rol to sing his song himself—but he didn't grow up on the movies, in the Phillipines after the bomb and WWII, on rock and roll, on streets where people strut and speak in tongues, in a time when everybody can be famous for fifteen minutes on TV. These days, if you're going to sing a song of yourself (not confessional, but arrogant and democratic, like Whitman), if you're going to be a poet of all that, then your language has to dance, has to call out, has to know how we all want to be movie (or rock) stars, has to know what goes on inside of being high, has to know what style is in a way of being a one-man-band in life, that to be, it is not important enough to think (sorry, Descartes), but it is to be on stage. Poetry cannot be contained in words—it has to be performed.

JUST ROCK AND ROLL

Sitting with Jessica at a lower east side coffee shop, I asked her about all those nice categories of performance (preparing to footnote my article with quotes from "October," "Semiotexte," and Schechner—is it performance art, oral poetry, art rock? Jessica said that "it's simply performance." When I decided to be stubborn about it and asked her to describe the kind of music she was doing, she was patient and friendly and thought about it a bit—"just call it rock and roll—to be simple," she shrugged.

It's not that Jessica doesn't know about the theatre, poetry, art and performance that's going on—she's done all that to find out how to do what she's doing now. Jessica arrived in San Francisco from the Phillipines

in 1962 when she was thirteen. She began writing early, coming to the attention of Kenneth Rexroth when she was fifteen, who helped her get published. She wrote, danced, and performed in the San Francisco scene through the late 60s and early 70s, and formed her first rock band (the West Coast Gangster Choir) in 1975.



Jessica Hagedorn

Jessica became friends with Ntozake Shange and Thulani Davis while still on the West Coast. She stopped off in New York in 1977 to do a reading/performance with

Davis and Shange—which became the production "When the Mississippi Meets the Amazon" at the New York Shakespeare Festival—and she hasn't left since. Her new book, "Tropical Apparitions," (Momo's Press, San Francisco) is coming out in September.

SPEAKING IN TONGUES

Jessica is an inheritor of the theatre, art and poetry experimentation of the last two decades—she can use the multimedia language of performance, with its kinetic, visual, aural, gestural, spatial and electronic vocabularies. Performance has been seized by the ability to speak in tongues, and her art can use them all.

What does she want to say? In "Tenement Lover," we will be able to see. She calls the piece an odyssey through the contradictions of living in America—the madness of colonization, powerlessness, energy and fun, all the choices. She's concerned about people of color, internationalism, the limitation of people's power by ruling politics. She wants to "keep people thinking, to educate them."

And she is in love with the hot fire of pop culture—its anger, speed, joy—and care.

"And this is for the wizard
who swallows his tears
like diamonds
lost in the caves
of his gentle throat
the music will consume your sadness
if you keep singing."

from "Something About You," *dangerous Music*, copyright Jessica Tarahata Hagedorn, 1975.

TENEMENT LOVER, by Jessica Hagedorn, The Kitchen, 484 Broome St., 674-7200, April 24 and 25, 8:30pm.

Photo by Liz DeMayo