

THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE FILM

512 West 19th St. (Btwn 10th & 11th Aves) New York, NY 10011

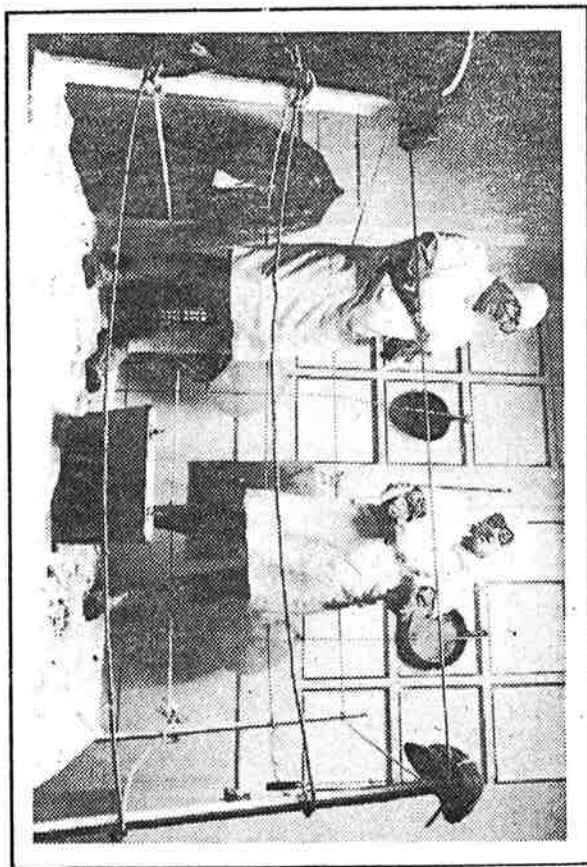
Reservations: 255-5793

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Is it possible anymore for an audacious theater artist to go "too far"? As experimental theater and performance activity reaches a peak of excitement around Manhattan this weekend, performers will be flinging down the gauntlet to fearless, inquiring audiences in work that tests as many different kinds of limits as there are artists willing to defy convention.

Their techniques range from dissolving the fourth wall (the environmental comedy troupe Artificial Intelligence), to gender bending (the playwright Holly Hughes, the character comedian Jeffrey Essmann, Mabou Mines' gender-reversed "King Lear") to food and obscenity slinging. At the Kitchen, the notoriously sloppy Kipper Kids will anoint each other with food and explosives, while at Performance Space 122, Karen Finley will level the world with torrential profanities. At La Mama, Ellen Stewart, the godmother of experimental theater, is presenting "Mythos Oedipus," a "nonverbal" dance opera she has conceived and directed. At the Performing Garage, the Wooster Group is performing Richard Foreman's "Symphony of Rats," a futuristic political pageant featuring giant rat puppets. Meanwhile, at Dance Theater Workshop, Ann Carlson's "Animals" offers a beatified vision of relationships between man and beast.

In a cultural climate where cable television helps propel talented cult performers into the mainstream in record time, at least one or two of these artists are likely to achieve national recognition within a year and become stars whose reputations transcend the downtown scene. Eventually, one can expect large cultural institutions like Lincoln Center and the Brooklyn Academy of Music to include some of this border-crossing work in their programming.



How Messy Is Funny

A very different kind of performance art can be found at the Kitchen, where Martin Von Haselberg and Brian Routh, the music-hall vaudevillians better-known as the Kipper Kids, are performing "Into the Box, Out of the Box," a piece that incorporates several of their infamously messy comic bits. The duo met in 1971 while studying drama in London (Mr. Von Haselberg is German, and Mr. Routh English), and quickly discovered they had identical alter egos, which they named Harry and Harry Kipper.

For several years they lived roles that have been called "a scatological Laurel and Hardy." Their stage attire consists of tie-dyed jock straps, shower caps and large false noses. In a famous routine that has been incorporated into their new show, they smash eggs on each other's heads, douse themselves with flour, paint and canned spaghetti, and top it off with swirls of whipped cream that are exploded with firecrackers. They have been known to leave a mess on audiences as well as themselves.

"It's not a chaotic food fight, but a very carefully choreographed ceremony," Mr. Von Haselberg said of their food-and-firecracker routine in a recent interview. "We're very specific about the food we use and its color and texture. It is a ritual we perform with the seriousness of a priest performing a religious ceremony, though the intention is completely silly."

"Into the Box" includes iconoclastic performances of several songs from "West Side Story," accompanied by rude, explosive sound-effects. They also perform songs made famous by the 30's English music-hall team of Flanagan and Allen.

When the Kipper Kids became the scourge of the New York performance-art circuit during the 1970's, some critics labeled their work Dadaist and compared them to Marcel Duchamp and Alfred Jarry.

"Though we won't reject the comparisons, we never sat down and consciously tried to revive the Dada movement," Mr. Von Haselberg insisted. "Being a Kipper is the most creatively satisfying and therapeutic thing we know."

Recently, the duo was discovered by cable television. They have formed a production company, and next month work will begin on what they hope will turn into a continuing comedy-adventure series for Cinemax. They are also featured guests on Bette Midler's upcoming Home Box Office special, "Mondo Biando." Mr. Von Haselberg happens to be married to Ms. Midler.

Weekend

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Avant-Garde Antics for Fearless Audiences

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