

THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE FILM

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

Reservations: 255-5793

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How It Feels to Be in Jail

By BERNARD HOLLAND

"The Empty Chair" — played Saturday evening at the Kitchen — is a mixed-media piece by G. E. Lewis that through television, computer-generated music and live performers instructs the audience on the experience of being in jail. Its center is a long and intermittent soliloquy by Bernard Nixon. Mr. Nixon, in a resonant bass narrative style, describes the protagonist's youth in Southern black America, his college education in Northern schools, his idealism gone askew and his current status as penitentiary prisoner.

His partner on stage is Douglas Ewart in a costume of colorful streamers and a transparent mask. Mr. Ewart evokes African roots with his wooden flute and rattles and more modern permutations of the black experience through his surrealistic attacks on the saxophone.

Surrounding these two flesh-and-blood presences are television screens of varying sizes. Prepared tape comments on Mr. Nixon's plight. Sequences of caged chickens housed in a vast mega-farm are the most ef-

fective. Scenes of country roads, (leading, one presumes, to freedom), idyllic picnics, chained hands and groupings of disembodied hands flapping like wings make their point, but less subtly.

Most of the television viewing, however, is firsthand. Roving cameras catch various aspects and details of the performance on stage and present them on screen as they are happening.

The principal strengths of "The Empty Chair" lie, I think, in its unadorned ingredients — the presence of Mr. Nixon and Mr. Ewart. The technological enhancements may benefit from their quasi-improvisatory nature, but they also suffer from them. The images are simply not interesting or sophisticated enough to compel our attention — either for themselves or for anything they might add to what these two performers are doing. Spontaneity lacking the spark of invention has a way of working against itself.

Mr. Lewis, Don Ritter and Ray Edgar were at the computer controls. The camera operators were Stella Ververis and Daniela Zehnder.