

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR
VIDEO, MUSIC
AND DANCE

Village Voice

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THEATRE

Tripping the Safe Fantastic

By Terry Curtis Fox

THE ORIGINAL LOU AND WALTER STORY. A musical with book, lyrics, music, and direction by Jill Kroesen, presented at the Kitchen, 484 Broome Street, 925-3615 (closed).

THE LEGENDARY STARDUST BOYS. A play by D. B. Gilles, directed by William Esper, presented by the Cherubs Guild at the Wonderhorse Theatre, 83 East 4th Street, 533-5888.

A few years ago, after I had written off my liking of Richard Brautigan as an understandable, if very '60s, lapse in taste, I read *The Hawkline Monster* and rediscovered that beneath all that cute sentimentality and cult adoration lay real craft and terror. I had the same experience a few nights back at a party where somebody made the mistake of putting on Patti Smith, whose commitment to the words of rock and roll so overwhelmed her derivative music and ultra-pose singing that she dominated the room.

I thought a lot about Brautigan and Smith during Jill Kroesen's performance of the current version of *The Original Lou and Walter Story* last weekend at the Kitchen. Kroesen has been developing her own cult status over the past few years, mainly through presentations of different variations on this piece and another called *Stanley Oil*. I first heard her last spring when she sang, briefly, with Peter Gordon's art-rock band. A friend I was with paid Kroesen the ultimate cult compliment: "A lot of people don't get Jill's humor, yet," she said. I was both intrigued and annoyed. After seeing *Lou and Walter*, I still am.

It is easy to see why Kroesen has her followers. She is an endearing performer, her nervous stage anxiety the urban equivalent of Brautigan's country-hip-gentleman routine. The Brautigan connection is inescapable, as *Lou and Walter* works much-tilled Brautigan soil: it's a nouveau-western with a Share If; his deputy, the Ef Be I; and a tapdancing stranger/savior known as Lee You. Kroesen plays Lou, a man who tends to fall into "unnatural love," which is love that has too much feeling. Most of the other men are content to "play with each other" in the "Sodom Union," a farmers' cooperative. Women are limited to the outskirts, where they ballet-dance around the town itself, an intriguing three-ring abstract construction by Jared Bark. Through her various guises as director, narrator, singer, video artist, and actress, Kroesen is both the ironic observer and the sentimental heroine of her dream, at once smarter than her story and a part of it.

The music of *Lou and Walter* consists almost entirely of languid introductions to songs that never occur. Imagine "Gloria" or "Horses" ending at their introductions and you have some idea of what Kroesen's music is like: smart-but-simple sounding, devoid of orgasmic release. There's no terror, no fury, no giving in to another world. There's no sex. Presenting a world in which you have to be a man to participate but in which two women (Kroesen and the Share If, Marsha Carlson) get to play men, Kroesen has managed the feat of simultaneously denying straight and lesbian commitments. She has diffused herself into something so fantastical as to be wholly without the danger of realization and thus perfectly safe.

Like many performance people, Kroesen conceptualizes theatrical moments without being able to realize them. Her town with a magic Spot into which all the members of the Sodom Union wish to move is a perfectly viable theatrical conceit (rather like Finian's famous rainbow or the vanishing Brigadoon), but Kroesen hasn't really learned how to stage things within a set. Thus the tap-dancing that gets everyone into the Spot should be fantastic: quintuple Tommy Tune. Instead, we see the *idea* of tap-dancing without the magical transformation: kids who have learned the rudiments but not the routines.

Watching Jill Kroesen, I never felt bored or angry. I was occasionally moved by the ingratiating nature of the stories and songs. But I also never felt the commitment or terror I do in both Brautigan and Smith. Kroesen's work seemed one generation too derived.

At least Kroesen's piece had intelligence, something much lacking in D. B. Gilles's *The Legendary Stardust Boys*. This is a doomed-to-failure middle-American play: a quartet called Big Stosh and the Stardust Boys is about to record its first album, which Stosh, the promoter but not the lead musician, thinks will push them past the polka halls of northeastern Ohio and into the stadiums of international stardom. As Stosh tells the boys, after the minuet, waltz, fox-trot, and rock dances, polkas are the only new thing left. Stosh's dream is crushed by the announcement that Nick, the genius accordion-player and songwriter in the group, is giving it all up to get married. We are asked to believe that the best musi-