

January 11, 1979

CONCEPTS

IN PERFORMANCE

Kroesen's American Dream

Sally Banes

Jill Kroesen
The Original Lou and Walter Story
The Kitchen, Dec. 21-23

A few days after I saw *The Original Lou and Walter Story* I saw *Oklahoma* on TV. I was amazed at how much they reminded me of each other. In both, not too much goes on except that people fall in love, have strange dreams, and the world is divided into farmers, women, and others. In each, the plot is basically an excuse for a lot of singing and dancing. Of course, there are also certain differences. If *Lou and Walter* is an American musical, it is one that has been radically transformed in style and content.

As in Kroesen's various versions of *Stanley Oil* (an economic analysis of the entire history of the Western world), in *Lou and Walter* a complicated story is set up primarily by asides, introductions and notes. The actions done by the performers advance the plot only slightly; for the most part they function to repeatedly illustrate salient moments. One gets a vague idea of the plot first by reading the program notes, and then Kroesen sits in front of the audience at a microphone, explaining everything again like an earnest child, bouncing a ball, grinning, embroidering on

the details. One finds out about the long-standing battles between the Share If and the farmers, including the time the Share If stole the farmers' sheep. One learns about the social structure of the town, including an important division of the sexes: "Women who are in the town have to go to the outskirts of town where they dance when they become 14. It isn't against the Share If's law like many other things are, but it is unthinkable in this town for things to be any other way. There is one exception: The Share If can have a wife in town but it is against the law for her to do anything except cook roast beef and she has to do that very well."*

Not surprisingly, people are rarely born in the town. Also, all the farmers belong to the Sodom Union, where they have meetings often to make decisions about all the problems daily life creates, they plant potatoes, they sleep, and they play. The farmers have to give away most of their potatoes so the sun won't fall down.

Once all that information is out of the way, the performance can begin, with the next installment of the plot. Lou (Kroesen) has gone away to Disappeared because of his "abnormal love" for one of the other farmers. "Abnormal love" is what we know as a consuming, unrequited crush. But in this town "abnormal love" has a debilitating physical effect — you literally fall apart, your arms fall off and come back on, and you might even disappear. The farmers have a seance and Lou emerges from a box, but he has lost his "thing" (and suddenly Walter finds he has two "things"). Now Lou is a she.

But this new development has to be kept from the Share If, who would send Lou to join The Women if he found out. The Women are symbolized by two dancers dressed in typical ballet outfits, doing pointe work that continuously traces out the borders of the performance space. Also, Lou confides to the audience that now she has to join a new club (instructions received in Disappeared) and choose someone else to join with her, but



Jill Kroesen in her *Original Lou and Walter Story* at the Kitchen: Lou is a she

if she makes a mistake the other person might die. The Share If's wife cooks roast beef by sitting at a piano upstage drawing cows and coloring them in red. Toward the end of the play, she gets to come downstage and show the audience her artwork. But mostly she gets yelled at by the Share If because she keeps breaking into spells of piano playing which cause Lou to either sing a countrified lullaby to the farmers ("Raaahk-a bah-ba-ay-bee-ee . . ."), or to slide up to the Spot to have a dream and sing. It is in the dreams, which punctuate the repetitive routine of meetings, planting, Share If's yells and threats, and lullabies, that things happen. A tap dancing stranger, Lee You, arrives, and Lou falls in love abnormally again.

Here is the crux of the problem. Lee You seems like the proper candidate to ask to join the new club. But on the other hand, "abnormal love" might be clouding Lou's reason. Lee You shows up in real life, and teaches the farmers how to enter the mysterious Spot by tap dancing. But then he's arrested by the Share If who mistakes him for Lou. He is let out of jail, but Lou is gone, once again to Disappeared.

For me the best things about Kroesen's performances are their repetitiveness and inconclusiveness. There is something haunting about the way everything happens over and over, songs begin again and again, and the piece doesn't really end. And there is something deeply satisfying about the constant return to the plaintive songs that lead nowhere, the inevitable farmers' banter, silly and comic, that frames every turn of the plot. It is an infantile, obsessive structure that suits the mythopoeic manipulation of symbols, and the illogical interweaving of real circumstance and fanciful causation.

Robert Alexander

THE KITCHEN

CENTER FOR
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(cont.)

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(as when Kroesen, who really has a slipped disc which made her hobble slightly throughout the performance, explained that Lou has pelvic inflammatory disease [PID] and that's why she'll have to walk funny). A childlike confusion of sexual identity, literalized in Lou's transformation, is also suggested by the range of feminine types — from the big woman who plays the Share If, that is, a big scary man (Marsha Carlson) to the ethereal ballerinas floating around the edges (Judith Hanfield and Debra Weiss) to the subversive, spaced-out Share If's wife (Regina Beck).

This infantile projection of a world, supported by Jared Bark's wonderful sets which include a Plexiglas potato patch illuminated in green and house frames that sway gently as people come and go, is dominated at its center by Kroesen's extremely engaging performance presence. As Lou she is the child/God, the animating force whose anxieties and desires populate the fantasy. The fact that in group scenes Kroesen often speaks into a microphone exemplifies and underscores this role.

The Original Lou and Walter Story is in many respects charming, brilliant, beautiful, touching, and mysterious. But it left me with one nagging question. Underneath its sexual confusion and attacks on authority, it hints at a message similar to *Oklahoma's*. That is, *Lou and Walter* could be interpreted as preaching a typically conservative, even anti-gay morality. In some ways, the story hints that to grow up, one must leave childish (i.e., homosexual) relations behind and find "normal love" (heterosexual). I hope that future installments will prove my interpretation wrong.

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