

Sunday, April 17, 1994

# Women

## Artists pack power into their performances

Continued from E-4

Denial" was less revolting and scatological, though every bit as tough in its depiction of patriarchal death-dealing as a form of necrophilia.

In "Reno Besides Myself," which the wild-haired comic performed at St. Cecilia's last winter, her theme centered on racial xenophobia as the public side of fear of intimacy. Reno gave it a boldly physical expression, as raunchy in body language as in words.

With her work a kind of illustrated "Civilization and Its Discontents," she lets her discontented body dance wildly or tosses her head so her hair jolts up, looking electrocuted.

Kirkwood's subject in "Bodies of Evidence" — the mental cannibalizing of her own body as a survival strategy for a sexually abused girl — is shocking enough. For most of the piece, she wears either a child's nightgown or the simple shift of a ward of the juvenile justice system.

## Waldman's tour de force is "Jovis," a 335-page suite of poems about male energy coursing through the universe.

When she performs naked, Kirkwood expresses both the child-woman's vulnerability and the survivor's ultimate acceptance of her own body.

Though not intended as an illustration of theory, that piece, like all of Finley's and many of Rosenthal's, became an example of what feminist theorists call "writing with the body." Their bodies become the slate upon which they "write" their way out of sexual oppression.

They know intuitively that politics and ideology shape a culture's re-presentation of women as images, and they reframe the old images to see them clearly before creating new ones.

### Becoming men

These performers take another route out of the old by taking on a male point of view, either ironically to expose it or directly to understand.

Male is not always the equivalent of bad — like that pig-headed sexist man on the recent *Time* magazine cover — though it can be, especially in the work of Finley. She transports herself into the mad minds of rapists with the ease of Eric Bogosian shifting into his substance abusers. He impersonates the addicted

characters in his male monologues; Finley presents them in that detached, critical way performance artists learned from Bertolt Brecht.

One of Finley's rapists rears his ugliness in a monologue called "I'm An Ass Man." He rips open the polyester pants of a woman in 4-inch cork heels, violates her, then flees when he discovers he has her menstrual blood all over his fist and arm. The images are so real they really do shock us with the man's madness, the woman's helplessness and pain.

Many of the men in Kirkwood's "Bodies of Evidence" are merely voices trying to persuade the girl to accept her mistreatment. "You can do this, you can do this," they tell her to calm down what they view as her hysteria. Or "You are so bright," various teachers, judges and social workers tell her as she moves from coercion in her family to coercion by the state.

But Finley and Kirkwood are just as likely to express empathy with certain men. Finley's love for her own father and brother and for her friend the late drag artist Ethyl Eichelberger suffuses "A Certain Level of Denial."

Similarly, Waldman's tour de force is "Jovis," a 335-page suite of poems about male energy coursing through the universe. Filled with invocations, letters, historical and contemporary poems and acrostics, it includes "Pieces of an Hour," the fey tribute to the late iconoclastic composer John Cage she sang at La Jolla.

From "Jovis," too, came "Linebacker," a stream-of-consciousness poem stimulated by a rush of TV images — football, news, advertising. "And now it's sport and war and violent sins against women and nature," Waldman intoned.

Then admitting that she may be preaching to the already converted, she allows the images and their associations to wash over her, until she reaches an orgasmic pitch: "To score to win to grow to prosper, to score to win to grow to prosper."

Like a cheerleader before the football is snapped, she finishes, "to take it to the top, to take it to the top to the top, we're all the old scores settle, then churn again, HIKE!"

Yet just as strong as this questioning of the continuum linking sport and violence is her love for her young son, the one she hopes never gets sent by the fathers to war. The boy, who lives with her in Boulder near the Rocky Flats Nuclear Arsenal, inspired one of her witty litany poems in "Jovis" on "How to Cover Up Plutonium."

Among the child's solutions: "Let's cover plutonium with frozen enchiladas. . . Let's cover plutonium with what cliff dwellings are made of, get some Indians to come back and make some adobe. . . Let's cover plutonium with hard candy, every single kind that gives immediate cavities. Let's cover plutonium with Play-Doh, dried dead people's bones and then there's just plain dead people with nothing on them."

### Litanies and incantations

The ultimate litany is Harjo's "She Had Some Horses," an enigmatic poem that gave its title to her third volume of poetry. The poem repeats the "She had horses who . . ." construction 22



Performing poet: Joy Harjo, a Creek Indian and jazz saxophonist, is a visionary poet for the end-of-century era.

times and has achieved nearly cult status among her readers, so powerful is its cumulation of detail, so resonant and oblique its meanings.

Harjo's incantations resolve dualisms into an all-embracing spirituality ("She had some horses she loved. / She had some horses she hated. / These were the same horses.") Finley, Waldman, Rosenthal and Kirkwood use repetition as exorcisms, like hag curses inverting the blessings of the beatitudes.

When the right modulations are there, the resonances are Biblical. The adoption of those rhythms gives depth and dimension to work that comes from a non-Christian, almost pantheistic point of view.

Female artists, of course, are not alone in their desire to heal the mind-body split as a paradigm for healing the earthly environment. They show over and over that the impulse to dominate the female body is the root metaphor for the impulse to degrade the natural environment. Nor are they alone in

turning to pre-theatrical, ritualistic forms. Many philosophically minded modernists in Western culture created work with links to more holistic, non-Western forms.

And in his recent, brilliant adaptation (with Robert Auletta) of the Western pre-tragedy "The Persians," Peter Sellars foregrounded the insight these women share: The domestic and personal become the public and political. Therefore: Be careful what you do to the women and children. It will come back like a ghost to haunt the culture.

What's so compelling about the work of this group is the wonderful assurance and variety among them as much as the shared meaning.

Though they all create work that embraces life lived in female consciousness and attuned to the earth, Rosenthal let her persona be murdered by a gang of futuristic thugs trying to steal a precious bunch of carrots in her (1992) "Filename: FUTUREFAX." Technology can't solve the human problems it seems to exacerbate.

But Harjo, creating the most all-embracing, end-of-the-century myth, offers the most hope, especially as a Native American woman, she certainly is a member of the most victimized group in this

country and has the most to understand and forgive.

Her "Letter from the End of the 20th Century" (from her yet-to-be-published volume "The Woman Who Fell From the Sky") is an urban folk tale in which a woman's grief has the ultimate power to heal. The spirit of an Igbo man, a Nigerian taxi driver murdered in a robbery, wanders Chicago seeking his killer. And finding the Jamaican murderer shivering in the bowels of a Chicago jail, he knows he could hang him or knife him, and it would be called suicide.

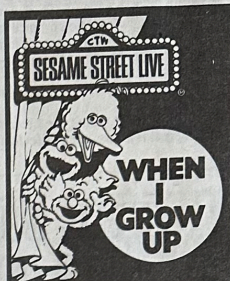
"It would be the easiest thing. But his mother's grief moves his heart," she writes. Because he can feel, he knows there is a choice, even after death.

And then, because he no longer feels ashamed, the killer fills with remorse "and cries all the cries he has stored for a thousand years. He learns to love himself as he never could because his enemy, who had every reason to destroy him, loves him."

These writer-performers offer hope that stories by women and other "others" might help us understand the inter-cultural conflicts erupting as the century turns. Their voices are alternatives

to the deliberate misunderstandings in the interests of power and profit that have dominated popular discourse.

As Harjo writes in her "Reconciliation," these stories can "keep us from giving up in this land of nightmares which is also the land of miracles."



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