

Artists Space

COMMITTEE FOR THE VISUAL ARTS, INC.
105 HUDSON STREET, NEW YORK, N.Y. 10013
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Jill Kroesen Experiments

By Tom Johnson

... Really

I've seen several of Jill Kroesen's performances, but I've never written about them. It's a zany kind of . . . Wait. Let me try that again. She's involved with a zany, casual new kind of music theatre, and my first encounters with it left me pretty confused. Now, however, she's doing it better, and I'm starting to understand it better, and I thought I should try to say something about . . . just a minute, let me check the program to make sure I get it right . . . about the *Excerpts from the Original Lou and Walter Story*, which she presented at Artist's Space on November 12.

The plot is about Lou and Walter, two gay farmers who live in a little town. Originally there were four other gay farmers in the town, but as I understand it, the others all died of broken hearts when the straight sheriff banned sheep from the town. I guess the farmers were pretty attached to some of the sheep. Anyway, the plot now involves only Lou and Walter (Kroesen and Robert Duncan), the sheriff (Michael Cone), the sheriff's wife (Bezu Ocko), an FBI man (Zan Turner), and a tap-dance teacher named Lee You (Joel Bergman). I notice that on the program Kroesen calls them the Share If and the If Be I man, but it's probably okay to use the other spellings too.

Excuse me for a minute while I find my cigarettes. This is going to take a while, and I'm not used to writing this way, and this doesn't seem like a good time to try to cut down on smoking.

I'm back now. Let's see. Oh yes, the plot. Anyway, Kroesen explains the basic situation at the beginning, for the sake of those of us who haven't been in on previous installments of *The Original Lou and Walter Story*. She introduces us to the Share If and the Share If's wife and the If Be I man, who are sitting at a table, and the tap-dance teacher, who also happens to be their tap-dance teacher in New York in real life, and her lover Walter, who is lolling around in a pair of white coveralls all covered with paint. She doesn't explain why she, a woman, is playing the part of a man. I guess that's covered in another installment.

Anyway, pretty soon Kroesen gets into her first song, "Celebration of S&M," which she accompanies on electric piano. It has three chords that go one two three one two three one two three, just like that, never changing, and has lyrics about "Oh Walter I want to suck your prick," and "When you beat me and tell me what to do/I can't help falling in love with you" and things like that. Quite crude really, but somehow not offensive in the context of this zany, light-hearted theatrical style.

Anyway, let's see. Oh yes, the plot. So pretty soon Lou and Walter go off to their tap-dance class, and . . . Oh, I forgot. They first read some dialogue from a sheet of

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paper, making some mistakes and having to try some of it a second time. Anyway, after fumbling through the lines, they finally get to their tap-dance class, which is in the center of the stage, and it turns out that they tap dance quite a bit more smoothly than they read lines. In fact, you can tell that they read lines. In fact, you can tell that they've rehearsed the steps quite a bit, and the result works much better than other attempts at updating tap dance that I've seen. This is partly because they have the good sense to go without the traditional ricky-tick tap-dance music and just do those snappy rhythms, and partly because of the zany, unassuming atmosphere of the evening as a whole. It's not like they're asking us to believe they're Fred Astaires or chickens or vaudeville performers or something like that. They just do the steps.

Anyway, after they've been dancing a while, Kroesen tells the others that she has to drop out because it's time for the next song, and goes back into the corner and sings "Pederast Dream." It has two chords that go one two one two one two, just like that, never changing, and has lyrics about "Going down a rough tube/Think he need a lube/His psyche protrudes/Pederast Dream/Peaches and cream" and things like that. Not quite as crude as the first one.

As in most music theatre, the plot stands still during the song, but as soon as the song is over, it gets moving again. Now the Share If and the If Be I man tap dance onto the center of the stage and arrest the tap-dance teacher. This is because they think he is Lou, and Lou is supposed to have done something wrong, though I can't remember just what. Anyway, the tap-dance teacher, Lee You, ends up in jail. The jail is simply an adjacent room, because there are no props or scenery to speak of in this zany, unpretentious theatrical style. Anyway, now it's time for "Lee You's Song," sung from the adjacent room. It has two chords that go one to one two one two, just like that, never changing, and has lyrics about I can do anything so sweet I can sing I can dance/Just with my smile I can make anyone love me if I just have the chance" and things like that. Not crude at all.

Anyway, after the song, the Share If's wife sneaks Lee You out of jail, and he goes back to see his friends Lou and Walter. As I remember, there was supposed to be some more dialogue at this point, but they all started laughing and mucking it up. That would of course be a terrible thing

in any proper theatrical display, such as one might see at La Mama, or just about any of the other so-called experimental theatres in New York. But breaking up is fine in this genuinely experimental context, where it happens naturally, and where it's an essential part of the style. That's partly what Kroesen's work is all about. Just being yourself, and breaking up when you have to, and telling a story, and not pretending to project your voice or focus your energy or hypnotize the audience or do any of those things that actors generally try to do. That's not to say that there's no discipline in Kroesen's work. Maybe there didn't used to be much, and maybe that's why I had a hard time figuring out what was going on the first couple of times out. But there's real control in the way they are willing and able to lose control when the time seems right. The general attitude seems influenced by the work of her former teacher, Robert Ashley.

That's not too clear, I guess. Let me try again. The unique thing about Kroesen's work is that she takes pride in the way she and her performers fumble around. No. That's not right. Maybe it will be clearer if I just describe what a difficult time I'm having trying to demonstrate her attitude. I mean, I'm generally pretty much of a spit-and-polish writer, and there's a discipline in that, but now, trying to suggest the Kroesen style in my own writing, I'm finding that that isn't so easy either. You can't just forget things or screw things up intentionally. You have to do it at those moments when you really do it, and when the people you're communicating with will understand that you're really doing it and not just pretending to do it. Is that clearer?

Anyway, to get back to the plot, Kroesen ends up with her lover Walter, singing him a lullaby. It has two chords that go one two one two one two, just like that, never changing, and has lyrics about "Rock-a-bye baby in the tree tops" that you've heard before. It's really quite tender, but it isn't working. The Share If's wife is playing the electric piano now, and she can't quite find the tempo.

Kroesen interrupts her song. "Could you play it a little faster?"

The Share If's wife fishes around in different tempos for a while, and settles into a very fast one. Much too fast.

Kroesen looks forlornly at the audience. "Can anybody here play the piano?"

She gets some laughs but no volunteers, so she beats out a bar or two for the genuinely confused Share If's wife, who finally settles into the approximate tempo. Kroesen finishes the song, and then exits with Walter and the tap-dance teacher, doing a neat little shuffle. A moment later she comes back out.

"That's all," she explains.