Just His Imagination

Joni? Dagmar? Jean Cocteau? Will the real John Kelly please come out?

May 1, 1998 By Clifford Chase

Summer's over. It's a rainy Labor Day in New York City, 1987: "And now, Miss Joni Mitchell." A figure in a long blond wig with bangs and a droopy calf-length "hippie" dress drifts onstage and begins to sing. But unlike most of the drag queens at Wigstock, an annual all-day drag extravaganza, this diva isn't lip-synching, and the voice sounds uncannily like Joni's. It's all there: The yodel-y breaks, Canadian accent, flips of the hair, stoop-shouldered awkwardness. I'm torn between hilarity and identification -- as if I'm seeing my own teenage adulation for her enacted at last. Joni closes with "Woodstock," recast as "Wigstock," the event's theme song, and the "hoo-doo" part gets hoots from the well-tweaked crowd. But then she renders the final verse startlingly current, and the mood turns on a dime: "And I dreamed I saw the drag queens/And they were all dressed up like maids/And they had found a cure for AIDS/ Across every nation...." A hush falls on Tompkins Park. Men in silver wigs tilt their heads and listen. I notice the rain has stopped, as if this drag Joni has conjured the afternoon light now piercing the clouds above the stage. And when she sings, "We are stardust, we are golden," we believe her. We want to get back to the garden, too.

John Kelly's Joni Mitchell has headlined nearly every Wigstock since 1984. The image of him as the singer is so indelible that it's strange to see him without the blond wig. On the day after New Year's we have lunch at the Museum of Modern Art, sitting by the plate-glass window under the gray light of a winter afternoon. At 43, Kelly's face is lined, handsome rather than pretty, his dark hair razor-short. He's tall, over six feet, and wears combat boots and a scruffy black turtleneck. He looks rather like an aging angel. An intense determination vibrates behind his shy, soft-spoken demeanor. As we discuss his career, again and again he voices dismay at being pigeonholed into any single role. "I am not a logo," he says.

I'm careful not to reveal that Joni is my favorite of his characters. "You don't like to be pinned down?" I ask.

He arches an ultra-expressive eyebrow. "If anyone's gonna do the pinning, I'm gonna do the pinning. As an artist, I want to keep all options open. Why limit myself for the sake of public clarity?"

Like it or not, Joni is his star turn. He has performed *Paved Paradise*, an entire evening as her, in clubs nationwide, and when Ms. Mitchell herself showed up at a concert at Fez, a club in New York City, the event was covered by *The New York Times* and *Vanity Fair*. Joni even gave her blessing to

Kelly's ironic but loving homage. "I was braced for a lampooning, and I didn't expect to be so touched," she told the *Times*. "I cried in two places."

Perhaps the reason Kelly does Joni so well is that his reach extends far beyond this one role. His cast of characters, presented in a series of original theater works over the past two decades, runs from the Mona Lisa and Dagmar Onassis (a fictional "love child" of Maria Callas and Aristotle Onassis) to drag aerialist Barbette and the mythic figure Orpheus. Masterful at drag but much more than a drag queen, Kelly doesn't fit into that catch-all "performance artist." For if he came out of the same gritty downtown New York scene as, say, Karen Finley and Eric Bogosian, Kelly's highly lyrical work has little in common with their intentionally ugly rants, and his range of interests and abilities is far wider. He writes, choreographs, directs, dances, acts and sings everything from Purcell to Tom Waits in his exquisite countertenor. Says author Dennis Cooper, a fellow survivor of the East Village's heyday: "There were so many incredible people doing performance in the early '80s. But from the start, John stood out." That's because Kelly introduced a refreshing "classicism" into both drag and performance art, says novelist and critic Gary Indiana, another downtown denizen: "There's nothing vulgar about John." Cooper agrees: "His work is totally light and delicate, and there's so much grace in it. At the same time it has a deep sadness and wit." He places Kelly in heady company with classic comedian Buster Keaton and serious avant-garde directors such as Robert Wilson. *New York Times* dance critic Jennifer Dunning dubs Kelly "a theatrical genius," describing his unique appeal this way: "He's so wonderfully artificial and sort of mocking, yet incredibly humane at the same time." But critics at *The Village Voice*, *Newsday* and elsewhere have accused Kelly of self-indulgence, vagueness and "an overly perfumed sort of romanticism." Others seem peevishly disappointed in him.

When I mention his detractors, Kelly raises his chin but seems to smart inwardly. I've quickly realized that the aching vulnerability he projects onstage is quite real. "Sometimes they say I'm brilliant as a performer, but the work is shit," he says, waving a pale hand. "One said, 'Where's the masterpiece simmering in his bones?'" But mainly, Kelly complains, wider success and fame have eluded him because of his work's variety -- he's an artistic commodity not easily packaged. "It's like I'm five different people," he says with a sigh. "But everything I do is related. I see it all making sense, but very few others do." Still, as with any cult figure, those few are effusive. Ellen Stewart, director of New York City's alternative performance mecca La MaMa, sums him up this way: "Honey, he is one of the most talented individuals on this earth."

In Maybe It's Cold Outside*, a 1991 ensemble work, Kelly's face appears on a screen at the back of the stage, with a red "plus" sign superimposed over a grimace of horror.*

"Some people got it," says Kelly, sipping from a white MoMA teacup. "Others thought I was confronting the Red Cross. Or the Swiss flag." He gives an eye-rolling laugh, but it's clear that he delights in the misinterpretations: "In my work about AIDS, I've deliberately left it unspoken. It could have been about cancer or another life-threatening dilemma."

The narrow, too-easy takes are what Kelly hates. For this and other reasons, he says, he has never spoken publicly about having HIV until now. "I'm not an 'AIDS artist,'" he tells me flatly. "I'm an

artist coexisting with HIV. It's a part of my life, but I never felt I'd succumb for one minute." His face sharpens with determination. "I don't want to give it that kind of power."

Still, having spent his entire adulthood in the eye of the storm, he acknowledges that "AIDS informs everything I do." He lost one lover, painter Bill Schwedler, back in 1982, and dozens of friends since, including another lover, his set designer, Huck Snyder, in 1993. Since finding out he was positive in 1989, Kelly has made five full-length pieces about the disease, including *Maybe It's Cold Outside* and the autobiographical *Constant Stranger*. But Kelly's perspective on death and mourning transcends the world of gay men and AIDS: Both his oldest sister and a friend, writer Janet Hobhouse, died of cancer in the early '90s. While many hit by the epidemic became activists, Kelly cultivated his own garden. "I didn't feel my place was in the streets protesting, but onstage," he says, "making pieces about AIDS, dignifying drag, singing in a high voice. It's a kind of activism, on my own terms."

MoMA's restaurant is clearing out, leaving a bare, modernist space. Kelly runs his hand absently through his hair, and I'm struck by his apparent loneliness as well as his Zen-like resolve in the face of so many losses down the years. It occurs to me that this resolve is achieved by closely controlling the story of his own life, not least the story he tells himself. This means admitting no doubt about either his health or his mission in life. It's a discipline that can turn even survivor's guilt into something constructive. In *Light Shall Lift Them*, his 1993 collage of dance, film and song about Jean Cocteau and the aerialist Barbette, Kelly had to perform on a trapeze 16 feet high, with a spotlight in his face. The first time he tried it, at dress rehearsal, he froze up. "I was blinded in a void hovering above a hard floor," he says, shifting his torso slightly to suggest fearful unbalance. "I took a deep breath and thought, 'OK, I dedicate this to my friends who died from AIDS or are struggling.' Then it was a piece of cake. It was a cinch."

The young Barbette, played by Kelly, meets with two sisters in Austin, Texas. This is a silent film, projected on a bedsheet. The sisters sadly explain that the third sister has died, so they need a replacement in their aerial act. They look at Barbette questioningly. The subtitle reads: "Would you be willing to wear a wig?" Kelly's rubber face flickers from doubt to wonder to joy, as if Barbette is climbing an internal staircase to self-realization.

A week later, over lunch in a near-empty East Village bistro, Kelly is recounting his own ascent -- beginning with seeing ballerina Galina Ulanova as the dying swan on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Kelly was seven. "That night changed my life," he recalls. "I said, 'Who are these people? I want to be that way!' But there was nothing I could do about it." Becoming a dancer wasn't a career option for a middle-class Catholic boy in 1960s Jersey City. Dad was an engineer, Mom a housewife. Kelly grew up admiring his two older sisters, who introduced him to the youth culture of the time (including Joni Mitchell). He cites the recent movie *Ma Vie en Rose*, about a little boy who wants to be a girl, adding, "For me, it wasn't about wanting to be a woman, but the theater of women's garb, of costume....Music, nuance, color: They're not of the man's world." He drew and painted ("I was always creating") and found annual refuge in elaborate Halloween costumes. Once, at age nine, he went trick-or-treating in a bra he'd made from the two halves of a football and rope. "That was my statement," he says: Given only male props, he'd subvert them.

And he found other venues for dreaming. “There was a closet in the basement with boxes of candles,” he says. “I’d stay in there for hours. We lived next to a park, and I’d go sit in trees. I’d have out-of-body experiences all the time.”

I ask for more. “You close your eyes,” he says, and does so, snaking his spine, "and feel your vertebrae start to … *shift*.“ His right hand rises above his head, and he gives it a flick. ”I used to feel myself on the ceiling looking down on myself. It’s this sensation of incredible velocity, even though you’re sitting still."

I see why he portrays childhood so well onstage: It’s a place he’s instantly in touch with. “Whenever I had a fever, I’d have the same dream,” he says. “A tire and a daisy in very close proximity. Is it about the ability of the tire to crush the daisy, or is it the daisy’s ability to grow in spite of the tire? Am I the tire or the daisy? I’m both.” He glances down and laughs. “Oh, and look what I’m wearing”: A sleeveless white t-shirt printed with black tire tracks.

He was lucky to live just across the river from New York City. There were school trips to museums, plays and concerts; in seventh grade he began going on his own (“to buy rolling papers”). In high school he found a sympathetic art teacher, did plays and musicals. At 17, he enrolled in New York’s American Ballet Theater School, with little support from his parents. “They recognized I was gifted, but there were other expectations,” Kelly recalls. “I had to discover all that stuff on my own -- auditioning, getting in, winning a scholarship.”

While studying at ABT and later at Parsons School of Design, Kelly made other discoveries, including the Ninth Circle, a great gay watering hole, now gone, whose patrons included the likes of Rudolf Nureyev and choreographer Louis Falco. I ask what he looked like as a baby faggot. “I got pictures!” he says. “I had long hair. I wore clogs. Really tight jeans.” Hip huggers? “Probably. I was skinny, totally androgynous. I was mistaken for a girl a lot.” What was it like coming out in the ’70s, before AIDS? “Honey, I was prime free-range!” he says with rare off-stage campiness. “Use your imagination.”

A turning point came in 1979, at a raunchy after-hours spot called the Anvil, where he saw drag queen Tanya Ransom lip-synching to German punk rocker Nina Hagen. “I thought, ’I have to do this,’” he recalls. A few weeks later, on New Wave Night, he made his drag debut, lip-synching Maria Callas’ “Haba-era” from *Carmen*. Kelly says drag was the ideal way to vent his rage at the gender miseries of youth. Drag also got him attention. “Since then,” he says, “it’s been one thing leading to another” -- from brief performances at the East Village hole-in-the-wall Pyramid Club to his full-length dance pieces staged everywhere from La MaMa to Lincoln Center.

Kelly interrupts his story to take a bite of his tuna burger. I’m impressed by the complex series of permissions he gave himself to become the artist he is, and I recall an exchange at MoMA the previous week. We’d gone to see a show of drawings and paintings by Egon Schiele, an art-school hero of Kelly’s and the subject of his *Pass the Blutvurst, Bitte*. The museum was packed, and we made our way through the crowd to a series of muddy townscapes. As Kelly started to tell me about an attempt he once made to visit this particular village in Austria, a haunt of Schiele’s, a

young woman pushed a stroller up to the painting next to us. “Some buildings,” said the small boy in the stroller, pointing and speaking in sing-song. “Sky-y-y…” Kelly turned his full attention to the boy. “It sounds like he wants to sing,” Kelly said to the mother. “Yes,” said Mom, “he just ate, and he always likes to sing after he’s eaten.” Kelly’s face lit up. “He should then,” he said simply. And then, as if enchanted, the boy began to sing. The mother pushed on -- her son’s soprano floating up through the crowd.

“The boy then looks at the knife and again places it on his wrist. In that moment, a lightbulb becomes illuminated above his head. He finds himself looking past the pain, past his wrist, to the floor. Something has distracted him. He moves the sharp blade past his wrist where it then punctures a chosen lemon. He lifts it to his lap, slices it with the knife, and bites into the sour fruit, embracing his fate, becoming a collaborator, not a victim.” -- From Kelly’s 1996 solo work, Constant Stranger

“The first thing the doctor said after she told me I was HIV positive was, ’I suggest you immediately begin a protocol of AZT,’” Kelly recalls. Behind his head, the sunshine is bright in the bistro’s big window. “I smiled and said no, thank you. Instead I embarked on my own quest to educate myself. I didn’t come from the head, ’Trust the doctor and blast yourself with chemicals.’ I thought there was more going on than chemistry.”

What Kelly did was use the leftover money from a Guggenheim fellowship for a stay at the now-defunct Golden Phoenix, an alternative treatment center in Arizona. There he got to experience coffee enemas, pillow punching, Kundalini yoga, jumping off a 30-foot cliff into water and climbing a mountain carrying -- and not dropping -- a raw egg, symbolizing his “essence.” He liked it. “It was a place to check in with myself mentally, spiritually, emotionally and physically,” Kelly says, staring down at my notebook as I scribble away -- he wants me to get it right. “It was all about not letting ego or fear take control, being in the moment. I developed a strategy for my coexistence with the virus” -- vitamins, meditation, yoga and herbs. Kelly has remained asymptomatic -- a case of pneumonia in ’91 landed him in an AIDS ward but turned out to be viral. Yet “my numbers were getting lower,” he says, so he started on an AZT/3TC/Norvir combo two years ago. Kelly’s confidence appears unshakable. Recalls his friend Cy O’Neal, founder of Friends in Deed, where Kelly attends a support group for people with life-threatening illnesses: “Not very long ago I asked John, ’Were you ever afraid you were going to die?’ And he said, ’Never. Not for a minute.’”

In a tight black t-shirt and striped pants, Kelly enters the small cabaret-style stage of New York City’s Westbeth Theater. Looking boyish, bashful and heartbreakingly innocent, Kelly begins his set with the old Brian Wilson song “In My Room.” Here his countertenor doesn’t register as “female,” yet this is a distinctly queer twist on Wilson’s original falsetto -- evoking a lonely gay teen rather than a Beach Boy. “There’s a world where/I can go to/tell my secrets to/In my room, in my room…”

“You see something that was completely invisible to you before,” says New York Theater Workshop’s James Nicola of Kelly’s knack for uncanny transformations. “I’ve listened to ’In My Room’ my whole life. I never considered it art until John sang it.” Kelly works this magic by valuing

intuition over intellect. “Half the things I end up expressing I couldn’t identify,” he says, glancing sideways at the next table, as if listening. I notice that the restaurant is filling up. “You channel stuff that you don’t intend to channel.”

If Kelly seems undaunted by HIV, he’s definitely worn down by the hand-to-mouth of noncommercial theater and the trials of an underappreciated and underfunded artist. “Do I move to LA and get a role in a sitcom so I can come back to New York and do my work?” he asks with evident distaste. *Light Shall Lift Them*, an ensemble work with live chamber orchestra, played to sold-out houses at the Brooklyn Academy of Music but left Kelly’s dance company $68,000 in the hole. Now he has scaled back to mostly solo performances. He earned just $26,000 last year, from grants and gigs; his credit-card debt is $14,000. He worries about money, and the frustration has crept into his work. In *Constant Stranger*, a Godlike voice intones: "I would say that the life of a choreographer-performer in the not-for-profit world is hell. It’s all in the title: *Not for profit*. All pain, no gain."

Kelly laments that his own quixotic nature scuttles opportunity. For instance, he secured commercial rights to Joni Mitchell’s music but has put off launching a commercial run -- he’s no logo. “It would be great to make some money. It would be a chore as well,” he says, shrugging. He plans to take a sabbatical from performing, and anyway he’s grown bored with drag. “I don’t see myself developing that muscle much further. I want to develop new muscles,” he adds, laughing, “so I’ll look like the Michelin man.”

Paradoxically, even as Kelly retreats from his Joni character, he reminds me of her all the more. “I’m a restless artist,” he says. “I have that in common with Joni.” Other resemblances: Both are shy introverts who perform; both hold to an off-beat spirituality, caring little what others think. And both hide an unyielding perfectionism beneath a mellow exterior -- a Joni trait that Kelly has captured perfectly in *Paved Paradise*. When Joni’s pianist gets carried away, Joni sways at first in closed-eyed enjoyment, but as the solo becomes fevered, the diva shoots him a withering sidelong glance. The solo stops, and the message is clear: Joni is in control.

Of course, Kelly would have to be that way too, in order to accomplish all that he has -- on shoestring budgets, usually in tiny venues, with high-risk material. He is, as he says, both the daisy and the tire -- an ethereal creativity that can roll over any obstacle. “I always knew I’d be an artist,” he says, perfectly erect, a still point in the now-bustling bistro. “I didn’t have much choice in the matter. I’d die if I couldn’t create.”

Carnegie Hall, 1993. Kelly’s Dagmar Onassis has just completed her last aria -- her sinewy, black-gloved arms raised, her scarlet cape flowing. She turns toward the audience -- swept-back red hair, heavy lipstick and eyeliner, long pea-green gown. As the applause dies down, Dagmar begins to emit a concoction of hilariously accented sentences adapted from actual Callas-isms: “I can sing these op-er-as.” The audience laughs -- the statement also refers to Kelly, a man trying to master the female repertoire. "So you see, rivals I have not, as a con-trrral-*to, as a singer. I am a singer trying to, ah, to* help *the music ... and sacrificing myself for it. So* love *me.“ More laughter. ”And, ah, think of me as a, as an* artist, *not as they will think of me ... . But I hope and pray I will always*

feel well, and that I can give all I can to art."

Last fall, Kelly declared in his journal that Dagmar, one of his most beloved characters, had died, on the 20th anniversary of her “mother” Maria Callas’ death. He tells me this in an off-hand way, as an example of how he’s over drag. “Really? She died?” I ask sadly. “But I’ve only seen Dagmar on video.” Kelly considers this. “Maybe I’ll resurrect her, and she’ll stage a comeback,” he says. “I have that power, to resurrect her from the dead.”

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