



John Kelly brings Joni Mitchell to "Out on the Edge"

by Brian Jewell

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Think of famous women who've inspired gay men to imitate them, and you think of the Holy Trinity: Barbra, Judy and Cher. Think again and you might come up with some classic Hollywood dames like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford, or contemporary ladies like Madonna or Celine Dion. Basically, any woman with a big presence and big reputation is fodder for female impersonation. The gentle, idiosyncratic musician Joni Mitchell, despite her huge influence on popular music, doesn't seem to fit the bill for a drag show.

But then, John Kelly, who'll bring Mitchell to life in Paved Paradise: The Songs of Joni Mitchell for Theatre Offensive's Out on the Edge Festival, doesn't like to be labeled a drag queen or a crossdressing act.

"How about we call it acting," he suggests dryly during a phone interview. Kelly has had plenty of time to consider how to label his Mitchell act. For starters, he's been a fan of hers since he was a teenager. "Her work was my first exposure to a certain kind of lyricism and music," he explains. "And her life and her wanderlust, and her relationships, were incredibly alluring for a middle class kid growing up in Jersey City."

Kelly first essayed his Mitchell impersonation over 10 years ago at Wigstock, New York's legendary drag festival. "I'd had the impulse to do it for a long time," he recalls. "When the first Wigstock festival happened I thought, here's my chance to do this in public."

Something magical must have happened, because Kelly has been doing Mitchell ever since. Paved Paradise is the most enduring of three shows he's created about the iconic folk singer, and he's been performing it between other engagements since 1996.

"The show runs the whole trajectory of her career," says Kelly, "from the first album to her recent stuff." Conceived as a concert, Paved Paradise features 16 of Mitchell's songs, with dialogue that Kelly compiled from various interviews and concert videos. "But really, it's the idea of her that I present on stage," he says.

"This clever, sometimes seemingly spacey goddess. She tells crazy, outrageous stories that have you wondering where she's going with it. She's a riot."

As for why Mitchell holds so much appeal, Kelly explains: "People can live vicariously through her experiences and ponder their own."

This will be the first time Kelly has performed his original work in the Boston area, but theatergoers may recall his performances in Orpheus X and Dido, Queen of Carthage at American Repertory Theater. A quick scan of Kelly's resume suggests that "actor" is almost as inadequate as "drag queen" to describe the multitalented performer, who first trained as a dancer with American Ballet Theatre and later studied art at Parsons School of Design.

"I never considered myself an actor per se," he muses, "because words weren't my thing. Words were the last thing I embraced, whereas most people start there. But I've been on Broadway, so now I'm officially an actor. I have the Equity card and everything!"

A fascination with artists has been a recurring theme in Kelly's work, both in his autobiographical projects and in performances that explored the lives and work of Expressionist painter Egon Schiele, trapeze artist and female impersonator Barbette, and writer and filmmaker Jean Cocteau. There's a bit of inspiration from Cocteau in Kelly's next project, a cabaret act that's in the planning stages. "I've got the name and the boots, so now I've got to get to work," he jokes. He's also preparing to showcase a visual arts exhibition of his year-long exploration of the paintings of Carravagio.

Despite the wide range of his work, and depth of his training and experience, Kelly doesn't really mind being best known for Joni Mitchell - "It's the only work I have that really intersects with pop culture" - though he does feel a bit rueful about American attitudes about drag, and artists in general.

"Here, drag is kind of naughty, " he notes. "And I do like that aspect of it, but in other places it's just another kind of performance. I don't mean to sound flip, but artists don't get the recognition they deserve in this country. Culturally, we're in sort of a joyless time. I can't help but think our culture would be very different if so many artists of my generation hadn't died of AIDS."

Though he said he hopes to concentrate on more avante garde projects, Kelly won't be abandoning Mitchell. "I love doing this material," he says, but admits that drag can be a drag. "For me, the drag is the least interesting part of it. Besides, I've gotten older ... when you're young and pretty it's easier to do!"

Paved Paradise: The Songs of Joni Mitchell plays Nov. 1-4 at 8 p.m. at The Boston Center for the Arts, 539 Tremont St., Boston. Tickets \$20-\$48.

On Fri. and Sat. Out on the Edge also presents Out of the Box: Twisted Tales, the first full-length theatrical work by Boston's own drag king troupe, All The Kings Men. At 10:15 p.m. at the Boston Center for the Arts. Tickets \$25.

Info: www.thetheateroffensive.org or 617.933.8600.

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