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'Paradise' found

John does Joni in stunning theatrical interpretation

By William Henderson

From the start of our interview, John Kelly strives to distinguish himself from the work, "Paved Paradise The Songs of Joni Mitchell," for which he is perhaps known. He bristles at the thought that it's simply a drag show, shrugs off the notion that he's an impersonator and not a performer and says the show is just 5 percent of what he does - it's just that it's that show that returns him to Boston as part of the 16th annual Out on the Edge Festival of Queer Theater so it's the primary reason for our telephone interview.

In "Paved Paradise," out performer Kelly inhabits (he'd more than likely OK the use of this word) the personae of Joni Mitchell, his signature countertenor uncannily like Mitchell's own smoky soprano. He divides the performance into two parts: the first, a tribute to a60's hippie chick and placid rebel; the second, Mitchell's glam L.A. 70's days.

"As a kid growing up in Jersey City, I would put on my headphones and be swept into Joni's world, a world rich with travel, emotion and innuendo. Her songs had the power to transport a lonely individual into another world. I suppose it was the words as much as the music; the combination of these two was, and remains powerful, beautiful and compelling," explains Kelly. "Within my chameleon quest of portraying, and becoming on stage an assortment of characters, I thought of Joni as a bizarre and compelling choice for a female role. A transformation with noble destination - Joni's words and music."

Kelly is a performance and visual artist whose work began in New York's East Village clubs in the early 1980's; since that time he has created more than 30 performance works which have been performed at many performance and alternative venues, including the Kitchen, PS 1, The Warhol Museum, the Whitney Biennial, Dance Theater Workshop, The Sundance Theatre Lab, The Drawing Center, LaMaMa ETC, Creative Time, Performance Space 122, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival.

While "Paved Paradise" might be his most accessible production, it's not all he does. Not hardly. Not by a longshot. The magic, the thrill even, of working his magic over an audience and convincing them that he's more than just a "dude in a dress," has its

moment, but so does his other artistic pursuits. He spent much of the past year in Rome on a project involving his image and those painted by Caravaggio. He's calling the show, at least for now, "Cara Viaggio," which means "sweet voyage" or "dear voyage." It's also an obvious take on the painter's last name.

Then there's the cabaret show he's crafting.

"It isn't a piano bar cabaret act, more like an expressionistic cabaret act," he said. "It's like the Dresden Dolls meets something theatrical and minimal and portable and mainly about the good music with some good visuals."

An unexpected boon from the production is Kelly's burgeoning relationship with Joni Mitchell. It took her a couple of tries to make it to production in New York, he said, but after she saw it, she gave it her blessing, and the two have cultivated something of a friendship. "I felt like I was Huck Finn attending his own funeral or Jimmy Stewart in that movie where the angel walks him back through his life. I was braced for a lampooning, and I didn't expect to be so touched," Mitchell has said about "Paved Paradise." "I cried in two places. During the song "Shadows And Light," my boyfriend and the woman who does my makeup and I were clutching each other and sobbing."

Kelly returns, albeit (perhaps?) reluctantly, to "Paved Paradise" near the end of our interview. He hasn't decided if he will perform in his Joni Mitchell drag or if he will perform as himself. ("This is an experiment for me to see how this works, to see how I feel about it today. I may do the show without the drag, you know, because I have the chops to do that. That might be interesting on some level to do that. Maybe I'll just say [to the audience] close your eyes or something like that.") Either way, he hopes that his performance lures in first-timers or reminds hardcore Joni Mitchell fans of the power and allure of her music.

"Young people especially, I'm their first experience with her," he said. "Maybe the drag lures them in, but then they realize that they like the stuff and go out and buy it and that's that." •

Elliot Norton award-winning performance artist, John Kelly can be seen in "Paved Paradise The Songs of Joni Mitchell," an homage, both visually and musically, to the legendary 60's singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell Thursday, Nov. 1 at 7:30 p.m., Friday, Nov. 2 at 8 p.m., Saturday, Nov. 3 at 8 p.m. and Sunday, Nov. 4 at 3 p.m. in the Calderwood Pavilion at the Boston Center for the Arts, 527 Tremont Street, Boston. Tickets are \$20-\$48 and are available at www.bostontheatrescene.com. For more information connect to www.thetheateroffensive.org.