

A MAN among women

Performance artist John Kelly is never more himself than when he's someone else.

by Colleen Dougher-Telcik

Picture this.

Joni Mitchell's strumming a guitar, knocking back a little wine between songs and sharing her observations about life, love, art and fate. And she's brought along a few friends this evening. On piano, there's Georgia O'Keeffe and on guitar, Vincent van Gogh.

The mood is intimate. Think about the last time you stayed up till the wee hours because the conversation was too good to even think about going to bed. A night where the candle burns, the wine flows and transitions are smooth and effortless.

One of those fleeting moments when clarity reigns and everything seems to make sense. That's the feel of *Paved Paradise*, the show which comes to the Kravis Center for the Performing Arts on Dec. 12 and 13.

But Joni Mitchell isn't really Joni Mitchell.

The striking woman in the granny dress and beads with the long shimmering blond hair is actually performance artist John Kelly. And he seems so at home in his Joni Mitchell role that an audience could almost forget that he's not Mitchell.

Kelly, a counter-tenor graced with a voice that's been known to move listeners to tears, is going to take you on a journey, a trip for

It's been my thing to sing about, to write about, he says. "And even if it's a feeling that isn't happenin' at the moment, the memory of it lingers."

"Don't you think?"

After a bit, he introduces the band — Georgia O'Keeffe, who's actually quite the practical joker, he says, and Vincent van Gogh, a guy who can play the guitar *and* paint, Kelly/Mitchell says. "He's probably also an excellent cook, too. One of those guys who can do just about anything."

Kelly, of course, is one of those guys, too.

"I must be a singer"

For more than 10 years, Kelly has been creating solo and group multimedia dance theater works that include choreography, visual designs, film and vocals.

As a choreographer and director, he's received two Bessie awards, two Obie awards and fellowships — nine in all — from Guggenheim, the Greenwall Foundation, New York Foundation for the Arts and National Endowments for the Arts. He's danced and performed with several companies, played leading roles in films including *Robert's Movie* (Turkey), *Sublet* (Spain) and, after a 10-year hiatus, revived his career as a visual artist, embarking on a series of self-portraits based on the characters he's portrayed.

needs to be more of a choreographer, he does it. Or a vocalist, well, he can just do that, too.

What's odd is that, even though he first studied music nine years ago, Kelly never thought of himself as a singer until a few years ago. Suddenly, he realized that he was singing often, he says. Therefore, he must be a singer.

Also interesting is the fact that he never formally studied acting. But his dance background and the control he has over his body and the way he moves it, brings much to his characters.

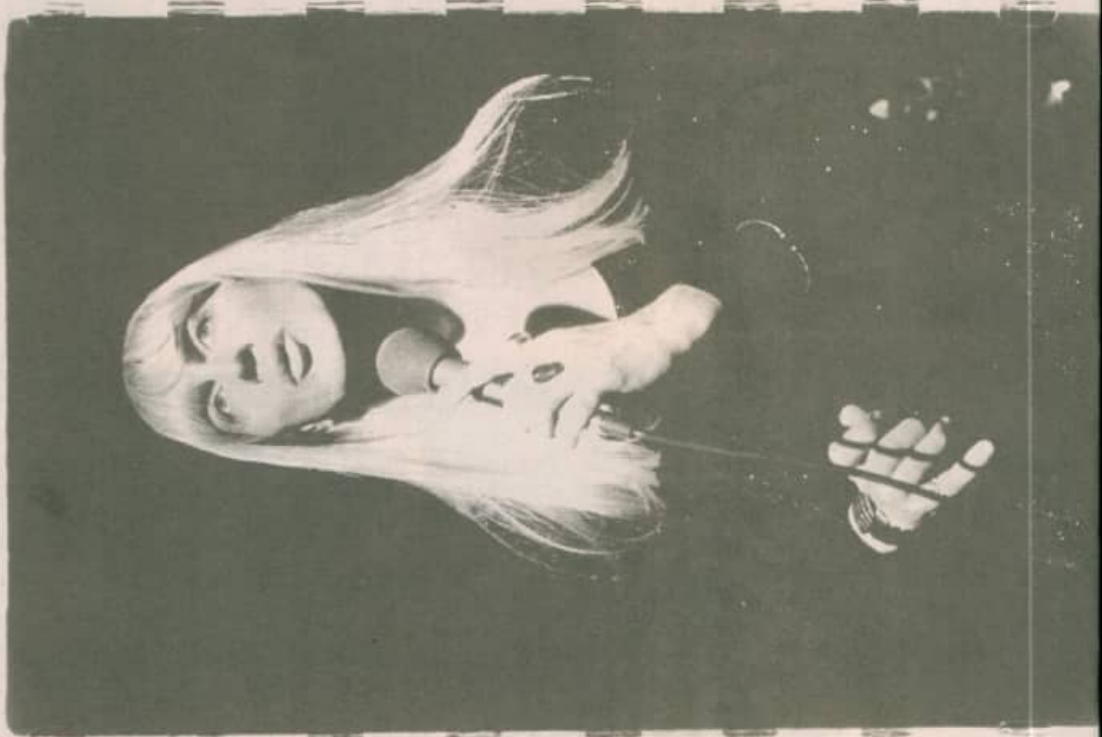
Watch him in his Joni Mitchell mode, one might think he'd spent his life singing. And acting. And creating some very unusual works.

John Williams, a poet and longtime fan of Kelly's who lives in Brooklyn, saw one of Kelly's early Mona Lisa performances at the Pyramid Club in New York several years ago.

The show, he says, was literally John Kelly sitting on-stage, posing like the Mona Lisa, and not saying a word. What you'd hear is a tape of Kelly's voice verbalizing the thoughts going through Mona Lisa's head while she's posing.

Williams thought it was brilliant.

Kelly also has played Barbette, the trapeze artist and Dagmar Onassis, the fictitious illegitimate daughter of Aristotle Onassis (she's obsessed with her mother and singing opera).



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Kelly, a counter-tenor graced with a voice that's been known to move listeners to tears, is going to take you on a journey, a trip for which he has transformed himself physically, vocally and emotionally into Joni Mitchell.

Growing up in Jersey City, Kelly says, his sisters listened to a lot of Joni Mitchell's music.

"It just got in my bones," he says. So, what started as a spark of interest many years ago, has since taken on a life of its own, which seems to be a theme in John Kelly's life.

Just one of those guys

As the show opens, the audience will see a portrait of Mitchell on one side, and Mona Lisa (one of his other inspirations) on the other. After a short time, a voice: "Ladies and gentlemen, Joni Mitchell," and we hear someone in a talk-show type tone asking her about her favorite food to prepare for herself.

"Apple oink," she says laughing. Pork chops, cranapple juice ...

Next question: "I want to know what you think of performance artist John Kelly's use of your work ... and in addition to your enormous cultural place in our lives, what it feels like to officially have been brought into the gay pantheon of divas."



Both sides now: John Kelly (above) and his muse, Joni Mitchell (right).

Her response: "I've seen pictures of him and I meant to go and see his performance in Los Angeles and things conspired, so I've not been an eyewitness to it but I think it's fun. Doesn't he have Georgia O'Keeffe as his piano player or something? ... I'm honored. I think that's great."

Those were Mitchell's comments before seeing the show. When she finally did see it in November 1996, she felt even more honored, as did Kelly, who has been perfecting his Joni Mitchell gig over a span of several years.

Early in the show, Kelly's in his Mitchell mode, singing "Conversation."

"I turn away before his lady knows how much I want to see him ... secrets and sharing soda ... He comes for conversation, I comfort him sometimes."

The first song of the evening winds down and, looking into the audience with eyes that sometimes seem to dance with a sense of controlled laughter, or maybe it's energy patiently awaiting its

designs, film and vocals. As a choreographer and director, he's received two Bessie awards, two Obie awards and fellowships — nine in all — from Guggenheim, the Greenwall Foundation, New York Foundation for the Arts and National Endowments for the Arts. He's danced and performed with several companies, played leading roles in films including *Robert's Movie* (Turkey), *Sublet* (Spain) and, after a 10-year hiatus, revived his career as a visual artist, embarking on a series of self-portraits based on the characters he's portrayed.



Boys on the side

While Kelly has certainly established a reputation for his ability to portray some very compelling female characters — fans say he does Joni Mitchell better than Joni Mitchell — most of his characters are male.

● In *Find My Way Home*, which recounts the classic myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, Kelly plays Orfeo, a radio crooner, who meets Eurydice, a lowly parlor maid, in a drawing room where he captures her heart. Their relationship ends tragically with a car accident in which Eurydice is killed and Orfeo left blind.

Desperate to bring her back, Orfeo charms the guardians at the gate to the underworld, which is staged as a Depression-era dance marathon, and takes us on a journey to a 1920s speakeasy, where he finds Eurydice and tries to bring her back to the land of the living.

Orpheus, a poet and musician in Greek mythology, is said to have sung so beautifully that even the rocks would weep. It seems appropriate that Kelly would play the part. *Find My Way Home*, which

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debuted in 1988 in New York City, will make its way to Miami-Dade Community College on May 8 and 9. (Call 305/237-3010.)

● In *Pass the Blutwurst, Bitte*, Kelly portrayed Viennese expressionist artist Egon Schiele. This work, which featured five performers, uses choreography, film, on-stage drawing and recorded and live vocal music to contemplate the nature of the artist and the creative process.

The show portrays Schiele in his studio with his lover/model, and entering jail on trumped-up pornography charges. Upon his release, he tries to regain his respectability through marriage. Then, finally on the threshold of happiness, his life is cut tragically

In *Paved Paradise*, Kelly-as-Mitchell observes that showing your heart is so much easier to do when you are wearing a costume.

Kelly-as-Kelly feels the same way. "It's a freeing device," he says. "It frees you up because you're not necessarily responsible for if they screw up or take chances or don't look as good, or if they put themselves in a vulnerable place."

The downside to this, especially when it comes to portraying female characters, is that "the minute you put on a dress, people don't take it seriously. They think that it's going to be camp and funny, and they don't think they'll be taken to a serious realm."

Nor do some want to be taken to that realm, he says.

With the Joni Mitchell show,

show last November at Fez in New York City, when Joni Mitchell herself was in the audience. He knew she was coming and, of course, he was nervous.

Stage fright is nothing new for Kelly. He's learned to deal with it. "I go into the bathroom and just breathe," he says. "You want to die and you want to retire, mainly with premieres or if I know somebody important is in the audience. But it's all energy and once you can start channeling it, it's fine, but until you can channel it on-stage, it's a very still, dead, quiet feeling. It's a very lonely and desolate experience."

Having Mitchell in the audience, he really had to focus.

In a Nov. 4, 1996, journal entry posted on the Internet, Kelly describes the buildup that night: "People come up to me and ask 'Are you nervous?' 'Are you excited?' I respond with 'I just need to do my job.' As long as I am able to do that job, I shall be fine. I will be able to strike the right character, find the correct tones in my voice and straddle irony, homage and pathos. As long as the people around me aren't running around like crazed chickens, I will be fine and my heart won't jump out like an alien uncomfortably ensconced in my chest."

Kelly asked that Mitchell be seated in the rear of the room.

"It was pretty difficult," he says. "I'm sure it was hard for her, as well. She wasn't expecting to be moved, but she was crying."

At the show's end, and after several encores, Kelly retreated to the safety of the tiny Fez dressing room and while his second bout of stage fright was erupting, removed his wig.

"I stand there in a state of awkward honesty. ... Then the inevitable as she enters, a woman obviously aware of her power, flanked and followed by her friends and handlers. Spying me standing, she says, 'Oh, I want to take off my jacket so I can hug you!' The physical contact which follows is sudden, clear and chemically simpatico. We embrace, this and this is all I observe. A moment for my history. I'm in ecstasy. I'm in the arms of this great artist."

After a show such as *Paved Paradise*, or coming out of any of his characters, Kelly says, he sometimes feels empty. "Especially when you give so much on-stage. Afterwards, I have to eat and drink something to shock my system. And it's dangerous. If I don't watch it, I can get very exhausted. And then I can get depressed."

"Sometimes you wind up all alone in your apartment, having put out all that energy and asking yourself, 'Why do I do this? Is it reaching anyone? Is it worth it? Am I making enough money?'"

But sometimes it's thrilling and exhilarating, he says. "It's good to be with friends afterward, it's good to have some beer, and talk."

"It's a strange life," Kelly says. "Strange that here I am — this shy person — and I'm able to hit my stride in front of a room full of people." □

W It's funny about drag. In Europe, it's a theatrical option. Here, it immediately pushes people's sexuality buttons, and makes them nervous." — John Kelly

short by the influenza epidemic of 1918.

The show, which debuted in New York City in 1986, was performed at several festivals around the world.

● *Love of a Poet*, Kelly's intense rendering and enactment of composer Robert Schumann's song cycle *Dichterliebe*, debuted in October 1990 at an abandoned ferry terminal in New York City. In a somber, but romantic setting, a sad poet obsesses over unrequited love, while a film sequence chronicles the poet's happier days, a time before disillusion and disappointment gave way to the psychological pain that nearly drove him to suicide. Finally, nature intervened and drew him back to a more immediate desire: hunger.

"That was a beautiful show," John Williams says. "The text was pretty much all in German. It was just gut-wrenching. The thing with Kelly is that he's really good at combining all of his talents, the singing, the movement, the humor and, of course, his voice. What you see him do with Joni Mitchell, is just the tip of the iceberg."

He does everything from opera to quirky jazz. In fact, Kelly provided lead vocals on "Swim to Me" and "The Handsome Man From Fiji" on the Jazz Passengers album *Jazz Passengers in Love*.

The freedom of disguise

Asked if there's one theme that weaves its way through his works, Kelly cites his characters.

"Most of the characters I play are going through a struggle, a rite of passage or a dilemma. These kind of things make for good drama. They're characters I can identify with, some are existing characters in history, and half are characters I invented."

"Usually, it reflects something in my life that I'm going through, want to go through or have gone through."

So, in a sense, there's a part of Kelly that comes to life and thrives in all of these characters.

Kelly says, he's found there will often be a few people who snicker all night. "And it's really annoying," he says. "There's a point where it becomes like 'I'm giving you this stuff. ... You should absorb it.'"

"It's funny about drag. In Europe, it's a theatrical option. Here, it immediately pushes people's sexuality buttons, and makes them nervous."

Many people come to *Paved Paradise* because they're Joni Mitchell fans; others go because they know Kelly pours his heart and soul into everything he does, and a few show up to see a man in a dress, despite their obvious level of discomfort with it.

Or perhaps because of that.

There is, of course, a logical solution. Don't think of it as drag. Instead, call it what it is: very fine acting.

"Drag is a very powerful tool," Kelly says. "At the same time, it's all people ever focus on in my work."

You do it once, he says, and that's what people remember.

Joni Mitchell, meet Joni Mitchell

As for Kelly's typical audience, snickerers are the exception to the rule. And more often than not, they're men.

"It's an American thing," Kelly says. "Many men have a hard time touching each other without that whole sexual thing going on. I've been to Istanbul, and men there walk arm in arm. ... We're obsessed with sexuality and age. It's in our marrow, because we're a young culture."

The majority of those in Kelly's audience see *Paved Paradise* for the heartfelt, moving show that it is.

"My job is to move people to tears or laughter or sighing."

For Kelly, it's not about applause or celebrity status. It's about making a true connection. And when he sees people in the audience, holding hands and crying, he knows he's reached them.

The ultimate, however, was his