

## A Poets Theater Tribute to Kevin Killian



Eileen Myles \* Scott Hewicker \* Cliff Hengst  
Karla Milosevich \* Craig Goodman  
Michelle Rollman \* Anne McGuire  
Wayne Smith \* Tanya Hollis \* Steve Orth  
Lindsey Boldt \* Maxe Crandall  
Arnold J. Kemp \* Carla Harryman,  
Lee Ann Brown & Tony Torn  
Susan Gevirtz \* Laynie Browne  
Patrick Durgin \* Norma Cole  
Jo Giardini

*for* Kevin & Dodie

In addition to his work as a poet, novelist, memoirist, biographer, literary organizer, and Top-100 Amazon reviewer (not to mention holding a full-time day job), Kevin Killian made time to write or co-write (and often direct) over 50 Poets Theater plays. Almost always performed as staged readings, with one or two rehearsals, minimal sets and costuming, Kevin's Poets Theater work demonstrated a commitment to a community-based, non-professional ethos where sociality and shared laughter were as important—if not more so—than how the work may have lived on the page.

Though Kevin's plays were performed in numerous cities, the bulk of the performances were debuted in San Francisco, where he gathered a troupe of artists and poets (and notably, few if any “real” actors) who audiences grew to love as talents and interpreters of Kevin's singular high-low style. We would go not to see Diego Rivera or Hannah Weiner portrayed on stage but rather Cliff Hengst-as-Diego or Karla Milosevich-as-Hannah. Regulars such as Rex Ray, Scott Hewicker, Wayne Smith, Norma Cole, and scores of others became stars (and often co-authors) in Kevin's world, deftly able to adapt to his seat-of-the-pants productions and pun-laced, celebrity-skewering, plot-twisted extravaganzas. His plays became social events, a gathering of the tribes that ignored the conventions of “proper” theater in search of something more communal, where the audience was invited to share in the recognition of what “amateur” performance and slap-dash aesthetic bravado could accomplish when we put our high-art pretensions aside for a couple of hours to see what literary and performance art actually looked like when brought alive within overlapping networks of community and friendship. For Kevin, everyone was a star.

For this mini-tribute, I invited veterans of his troupe of performers to share brief remembrances of Kevin's singular brand of Poets Theater, in hopes that the memory of the shared experience of working with Kevin

may live on alongside his written oeuvre. My thanks to the participants, as well as to all those who over the years donated their time and energy to make Kevin's Poets Theater live, breathe, laugh, and sing.

—David Buuck

## KEVIN KILLIAN

### Plays

*Afterglow* (written with Norma Cole)

*The American Objectivists* (with Brian Kim Stefans)

*Art Colony Survivor* (with Norma Cole)

*The Big Keep*

*Blackboard Jungle*, a remake for Darrell Alvarez

*Box of Rain*

*Capriccio* (with Jocelyn Saidenberg)

*Celebrity Hospital* (with Karla Milosevich)

*Crime of the Century*

*Cupid and Psyche* (libretto)

*Cut*

*Dance World Gym* (with Karla Milosevich)

*Diamonds and Rust* (with Wayne Smith)

*Dinner Plus Theater* (with Tanya Hollis)

*Fascination* (with Wayne Smith)

*Flamingo Road*

*Flophouse*

*Geyser* (with Wayne Smith)

*The Gossip Girl Play*

*Happiness is a New Idea in Europe* (with Geoffrey Wildanger and  
Kit Schluter)

*The High and the Mighty* (with Dodie Bellamy and Colter Jacobsen)  
*The House of Forks*  
*Island of Lost Souls*  
*The Last Days of Black Mountain*  
*The Lentricular*  
*Life after Prince*  
*Love Can Build a Bridge* (with Karla Milosevich)  
*New Light on Riboflavin*  
*Often* (with Barbara Guest)  
*Peach Secret*  
*Political Animals*  
*The Pre-Poetic*  
*Princess of Tides*  
*The Red and the Green* (with Karla Milosevich)  
*Return to Sender*  
*The Schwimmer Effect* (with Scott Hewicker)  
*Seeing Red*  
*Seth Speaks* (with Karla Milosevich and Craig Goodman)  
*The Shakers* (with Wayne Smith)  
*To Sir With Love*, a remake for Darrell Alvarez  
*Slide Show*  
*The Smith Family* (with Craig Goodman)  
*Stone Marmalade* (with Leslie Scalapino)  
*Tariq Alvi's Nightmare*

*That*

*Thelma!* (with Stewart Wallace)

*Three on a Match*

*Total Eclipse* (with D-L Alvarez)

*The Vegetable Kingdom* (with Rex Ray)

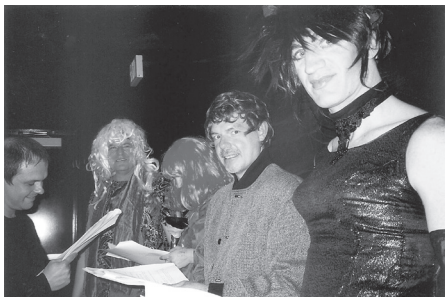
*Walking Tour*

*Wet Paint*

*A Whole New World*

*White Rabbit* (with Kota Ezawa and Hobbypop Museum)

*The Wishing Well* (with Larry Rinder)



## EILEEN MYLES

### Don't Go

I honestly don't know what to do with this moment in time when my peers are dying (I'm not immortal?!) and everyone who isn't dead becomes a kind of audience. Dodie won't be throwing herself on the pyre nope not yet but Kevin has gone through the door and I don't know what's on the other side but he isn't here and I was in Berlin when he died and his name became a tiny anthem in a poem I was writing called "The Trip" which isn't so good but every now and then I would just say Kevin. His name is also on my white board in Texas that lists groceries and things I need to do and then it says Kevin. On IG I'm chatting under a photo and then "Kevin". Kevin dead keeps rearing his head because he can't believe he's not living. Since I was in Berlin when he died it was possible he would be in America when I got back and later I was in New York and he might be out here in San Francisco and he wasn't at Naropa and everyone kept talking about Kevin and now I'm here in San Francisco and Kevin isn't here. How could he be gone. I wish he didn't go and we will be talking about him a lot as long as we or I still feel Kevin will somehow walk in the room holding papers and that feeling will last for a very long while I don't know if you can have that feeling enough but at some point it will seem normal but not now. I think of Kevin's style as high Irish. He had a high Irish voice but he also was a Long Island prep and his family wasn't broke so there was something regarding and then disregarding in regard to where he comes from that he carried and finally Kevin Killian was just always very assertively responsible for truly being here making this a specific place that is deeply connected to other places in art and culture - writing history, other moments that Kevin might've wished he had lived in. Kevin was more



than a bit of a natural historian a long gossip and somehow by means of his enormously good manners he made this place where he stood and we all stand with him be part of that long history and becoming now after all and helplessly a kind of art and literary demi-monde. He made it great to be here. Kevin had a splashy way of making everyone feel like they had just arrived with the turkey. Me for example. Nobody's appreciation of my poetry made me feel better about it than Kevin's. Kevin had an explosive kind of intelligence since day one which for me was the day I met him at Stonybrook in the seventies when he invited me and Jane and Michael and Tim to take the LIRR out to him to read our work in a gay event that Kevin had organized. He was young then, three years younger than me which was 26 then to my 29. Huge. He was cute and lively. He had good hair always, very Irish hair meaning thick and reminiscent of someone in a band in the 60s or the 70s, longish, wavy and fountain-like and Kevin typically wore suit jackets and shirts but I imagine him always wearing some kind of horizontal striped teeshirt under a suit jacket denoting an easy kind of rock and roll royalty. Also Gotham bookmart when there was no difference. Straight to Broadway like Ntozake Shange or down to Electric Circus with Gerard. Kevin's look also signified the landscape he came from, Long Island, the sea, he and Dodie's small craft, *Mirage*, flickering on the horizon alongside all the album covers and colored portraits on the covers of *Interview Magazine* of singers gazing out at us their fans in their and our youth.

There was always a youthiness about Kevin Killian. To be young is to be an unabashed fan. He had it as an elder. Kevin had a marvelous instrument for effusing, his changeable expansive reckless grand dame elegant surprising voice sourced from an endless bucket of light from somewhere that scattered love and fun and wit and bitchiness around us all and offered a lawn and a fence to hold us in. Kevin as Bo peep. Who

will hold us now? I definitely feel like he taught me to write. I'll start with the thing of his books. At first him and Dodie's. A press called e.g. I could be wrong. Slim pamphlets of prose in the 80s kicked out like singles. A story would just get dropped into the flow of the writing world. It made a whirlpool. I have such a memory of being in Venice (Italy not California) not too long after an early trip to San Francisco when I saw everyone and I was handed those blue pamphlets by Kevin and Dodie prose not poetry which seemed like such a new idea and I brought them with me and read them late at night in misery I was just getting dumped by my first great love Zeborah in my skinny bed in this hotel where the guy who ran it confused the syringe and hydrogen peroxide and baking soda I was using to salvage my teeth and gums as evidence I was a junky and he pushed me down on the bed in the tiny room I was sleeping in as if he could fuck me I was such a piece of shit specimen and I kept trying to explain to him in pantomime cause we shared no other language that I was shooting stuff into my gums not into my arms and those blue books were on my bed gazing up at this pathetic spectacle and the writing was so marvelous.

It was all the same world. *Bedrooms Have Windows* was the most influential book of stories I ever read. *Spread Eagle* is his masterpiece but the child is the father to the man. Bedrooms channeled youth, hysteria, intimacy, gayness and kitsch in a compact unstable way I had never seen and will never see again. I will never read like that again. Completely porous. An invitation. All daisies and pop and it excited me. Both Kevin Killian and not he. He asked if he could pop one of my poems into one of the stories in *Bedrooms* and I hadn't even known myself yet, not as a poet whose furniture anyone could use and I definitely didn't know that a story could part its petals to hold a poem of one of their peers. It was such a confirmation—like a high-toned dog show that one gesture of

Kevin's plus he paid for my poem and I cashed the check. I thought I am in a new world now and Kevin made it happen. He professionalized his passion. He put all his money where his mouth was. I wrote a double review of Kevin's collection of stories and as well of his novel *Shy*, also a masterpiece, again cause the characters in it, Gunner, an older dude and what was the kid's name were so recognizable, the world was so true. Kevin's writing kept demonstrating the veracity of the world and repeatedly made the point that our living does not so much get idealized by fiction as fiction must get taken down by life from somewhere improbable with a capital F. Kevin made fiction true. His work, all of it, always proposed both writing and living as a space as unpredictable and social as maybe Andy Warhol's factory and the early black and white films. Kevin was all early Andy, an non-combative force, an unstoppable one. Kevin blithely made an injection, Dr. Kevin, into exactly where or what he wanted to be in—what was outrageous and saintly about Kevin was this overwhelming sense that there was no giant cultural separation at all. He made our time less lonely. He was a cheery weirdo like Robert Walser. Yet Kevin kept his job. It strikes me that the only other person as inappropriate and grandiose and remarkable as Kevin though without the fizz, since she was often comically dour was Leslie Scalapino. They both carried an earnest conceit that the culture needed them and confronted its bigness with a daisy, like the hippy chick walking up to the soldiers, the massness of mass media crumbled as they walked their work like a backstage pass right through everything's walls and cozily invited it into their funky home. When I think of Kevin's Amazon reviews the enormity truly is how big his project was, how small Amazon, how disposable his literary friend ads were designed to be and yet by turning them out fast as light he occupied Goliath and undid him. Kevin loved culture and was its constant undoing. I don't know if Kevin Killian believed in god but considering the hole he's left in the world and all the glitter that is filling this room I am totally sure that god believed in Kevin.

## SCOTT HEWICKER

The first play I saw by Kevin Killian was *Life after Prince* at Kiki Gallery in 1993. It was a beautifully messy spectacle in a cramped gallery full of people. What was exciting about it was its unpredictable mix of amateur flatness and high camp. I'm not sure if they were always fun to sit through, but they sure were a lot of fun to be in.

Seizing on my background as a failed actor, Kevin cast me in his next play as River Phoenix in *Three On A Match*, alongside Andrea Juno as River's twin sister Leaf. We had to share genitals for some reason, so we had to comically gyrate on stage together. I remember being impressed that Nayland Blake memorized his part of Gus Van Sant. Except perhaps for Arturo Galster (who played Klaus Nomi with a scolding precision and professionalism in D-L and Kevin's production of *Total Eclipse*), no one else took their acting roles (or chops) quite as seriously.

Through Poets Theater, I became friends with so many people, especially poets and artists I might not have met otherwise: Jocelyn Saidenberg, Yedda Morrison, David Buuck, Leslie Scalapino, David Brazil, Norma Cole, Taylor Brady and Tanya Hollis, to name just a few.

My favorite roles were the female characters: Linda McCartney, Janis Joplin and Tuesday Weld (especially since the painter Caitlin Mitchell-Dayton painted a life-size portrait of me in that costume). My favorite plays were where Kevin collaborated with one of us: *Vegetable Kingdom* (written with Rex Ray), *The Shakers* (Wayne Smith), *The Smith Family* (Craig Goodman), and *Love Can Build A Bridge* (Karla Milosevich). I wrote one with Kevin too, called *The Schwimmer Effect*, an overstuffed

TV Hollywood sci-fi romp involving a Logan's Run style conspiracy plot against young TV actors and the aging-stars-now-powerful-Tibetan-Buddhists who save them (I told you it was overstuffed!). We performed it once at New College in the auditorium that is now The Chapel on Valencia St. I remember Kevin wrote lines like a machine, and I remember laughing often as he gave shape to my convoluted plot. After the performance, he gifted me a first edition of the Logan's Run trilogy signed by William F. Nolan.

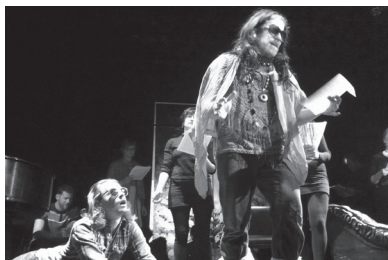
Kevin's plays were the perfect vehicle for me to be a real ham and for over 20 years I performed in dozens of them. How could I refuse Kevin's gleaming invitations: "Scott, have I the role for you, you'll be just perfect!"

I was in so many plays I can hardly remember them all. Recently, someone posted the cast list to Political Animals and I was listed as playing Jack Kemp though I have no recollection of this play. I made out with the artist Laurie Reid in one play but I forget which one it was (though I won't soon forget that kiss). Could it have been the same play? Who knows? I think I mostly lived for my time on stage and it was difficult to keep track of all the complicated narratives that unfolded while waiting for cues backstage.

I also remember that Kevin was constantly revising scripts. Actors that were in rehearsals or expected for the part might not be in the final production: anything can happen with free talent. It happened most painfully after the final rehearsal at Rex Ray's studio, when Rex announced he was too ill to perform in the actual play. Anyway, Kevin would give us completely new scripts right before the performance (even if he just changed the name of the actors) and we often had to hurriedly highlight our parts again in the dark backstage, all of us

huddling under the few security lights, trying to keep track of where we were in the performance and passing a bottle of whisky back and forth, laughing it up.

Sure there were times of grumbling about being in yet another play, but it pains me deeply that there won't be any more. I'd do anything to be in one again, just to see Kevin alive and smiling.



*David Brazil as Wallace Berman & Scott  
Hewicker as Janis Joplin, with Karla Milosevich  
as Jay DeFeo, Wet Paint, SFMOMA*

## CLIFF HENGST

My first role in a Kevin Killian play was as a straight guy. His name was Steve Poitrine, and he was a detective, so I had to play him detectively. I remember the line I said to Tonya Harding as she is being led off stage, “Sorry Tanya, the only gold medal you’ll be getting is from a sack of Gold Medal flour.” I probably got that wrong. Sorry, Kevin.

Sometimes the manuscripts would be thick, printed on both sides even! You looked for the Ziploc bag of highlighters, and stated striping out your lines, which was difficult, there would always be someone there you wanted to talk to, but didn’t have the time. You counted the pages and lines, some real good ones, and tried not to laugh too hard. You had to know your exits and entrances. If you didn’t your scene would end and you’d just be standing there. The more plays we performed together the better we got. I never actually thought we were a theatre group but we totally were.

I remember one play where we had an actual equity-card carrying actor perform with us. Backstage he gave us all notes and direction, with the intent on making us funnier and faster. He didn’t realize that it wasn’t so much about the acting, it was more about how can I deliver Kevin’s words in a way he’d love. They were the perfect mix of shade, poetry, and camp. Acting was cool but this was different, some kind of gay emotion. I don’t know how else to put it.

There are moments I’ll always treasure: Rex and I applying our clown makeup in a bathroom some guy had recently blown up, gagging and laughing at the sight of our clown faces coming together in the bathroom

mirror of CCA. Talking backstage with Laurie Reid, making her miss her cue. Tanya Hollis as Emily Dickinson saying, “What’s a library?” in her driest Pepperidge Farms New England accent. Passing around the whiskey bottle backstage with the HobbyPop crew. Wig changes, props dropping, costume revamps, last-minute editing. Sometimes you had to sacrifice your weekend in rehearsals and performing. Other times the plays themselves seemed to go on forever. They were always a lot of fun. They informed my practice in a way I could never imagine. I was lucky that Kevin gave me some of the best characters to play with. I will miss performing for him so very much.



*Craig Goodman &  
Cliff Hengst in The  
Shakers, CCA*



## KARLA MILOSEVICH

I was lucky to fall into the orbit of Kevin Killian and be cast in his Poets Theater plays. I've played so many fun characters and met really interesting and lovely people through Kevin. My first part was as a psychiatrist in a play performed at my alma mater, the San Francisco Art Institute. I remember being so nervous that I had to use a pencil as a prop so the audience might not notice my hands shaking. Since then, I've played Sinead O'Connor, Patty Smythe, Goldie Hawn, Hillary Clinton, news reporter Kitty Potter, and many more. Being in his plays was easy, because there was just one rehearsal—a read through—and then we got in character and performed it live, with plenty of spontaneity and no pressure. He was never bossy or critical, but would give pointers here and there, such as don't just stand there, move around some on stage.

Kevin invited me once to a Patti Smith reading at the Victoria Theater in San Francisco. He got there early so we could get good seats; he probably had waited for at least two hours so that when we went in he and his wife Dodie Bellamy and I were front and center, mere feet from Patti Smith. Early on, she burped and apologized to the audience (which probably included a lot of vegetarians, she said) because she had eaten rabbit stew, and "sorry, but it was delicious." Towards the end of her reading, she played a couple of acoustic songs with her guitarist Lenny Kaye, and did "People Have the Power". Kevin was visibly excited; he stood up and sang along pretty loud, he was so adorably happy and moved. That song will always remind me of him and that moment.

Kevin was so supportive of artists and went to all our art openings and events. In turn, he encouraged us to attend readings and events which opened my eyes to a whole other world in San Francisco, the literary scene.

Kevin and I wrote five plays together, and every one of them was a joy through and through. When working on a play, we'd meet for one hour every weekend morning, usually at my kitchen table, and just laugh and come up with whatever popped into our heads. I can type fast, so he'd dictate and I'd type it up, interjecting with characters, plot lines, or dialogue here and there. He kept the whole structure together and the story moving along from start to finish, so I could just relax with it. Then, at the end of the working hour, he'd be off to do the next thing, to meet another person for a project or something or attend an event, and I'd email him the current version. When we had finished the play, he would edit and format the document to make the final.

Once, when we performed our *Celebrity Hospital*, I received this email from Kevin:

When the play ends and Kurt Russell and Kitty Potter join hands, we want to have a music cue of Patti Smith singing "People Have the Power." Then everyone comes out and joins hands and bows as the music plays and hopefully the audience is clapping.

We were sad because Rex Ray had died and couldn't reprise his recurring character, Rick Penny, and those were tough shoes to fill. But Kevin stepped in and played the part as a tribute to Rex. In an email around then, he wrote about Rex:



*Karla & Kevin in Celebrity Hospital*

“What an angel—of course a wicked one too :-)”

I feel the same about Kevin. Truly an angel sent from above, to inspire, encourage, and be joyous with. One of the most giving, supportive, brilliant, and funniest people I have ever known, and of course, delightfully nasty!

His Amazon reviews always bring a smile to my face, just like any thought of Kevin, who was so generous with his happiness. For instance, his review of Advil:

“Ordinarily I agree with James Koenig’s reviews 1000 per cent. Not for nothing is he one of Amazon’s top 100 reviewers. And yet, when he tells us we might as well just get the generic version of ibuprofen, as well as brand name Advil, I demur sharply.

Other reviewers recommend Advil for its ease of use, but I’m here to tell you the main reason to buy it is that it is tasty and sweet, rather like a cherry. If common sense and doctors warnings didn’t preclude it, I would be popping Advils all day just to get that delicious taste in my mouth, like a kid in a candy store.

First week of January I had an industrial accident at my office when a large box of heavy paper stock tumbled down onto my foot from a great height. Rushed to the hospital, I found myself weak and faint, and when the doctor told me that I should be having an Advil every four hours for the next three months, to reduce swelling and to heal the fracture, I perked up considerably. Now in front of me as I type, is a king size dispenser of Advil,

which used to be an oversized Pez dispenser in black and gold, wearing Tim Lincecum's uniform, which some friends had bought me on a trip to the SF Giants stadium here. Now it dispenses Advil and I find myself looking at the clock wishing it was four hours later already. I'm hooked I guess, and a little piece of me wishes I could return to the days of youth when I needed nothing, no poppy or mandragora as Shakespeare says, but in the meantime I do enjoy a nice Advil every four hours, and as a side benefit, its healing atoms have sped the recovery of my swollen foot inside its sturdy surgical boot."

The German artist Martin Kippenberger once said, "What I'm working on is for people to be able to say that Kippenberger had this really good mood."

Kevin Killian had a really good mood.

## CRAIG GOODMAN

Our writing sessions would last one hour—no longer than 90 minutes—on Saturday morning at 11 at my kitchen table. I'd move my iMac to the kitchen table and make sure to have some Diet Pepsi for Kevin—in the post-Tab era—but he always had one himself in his Birdwell tote.

"I've been thinking that at this point, we could have Tuesday Weld come in!" he'd say. "Type 'Look, here she is now! Tuesday Weld!'"

I'd follow his lead through the plot, trying to contribute by pulling in obscure quotes and references from a mutually-beloved film or actress—trivia that tends to linger long in my memory banks.

We both loved Jennifer Jones, who was always expiring dramatically in a fall (*Towering Inferno*, *Angel*, *Angel Down We Go*), spanning generations in a single performance (*Portrait of Jennie*), or playing cringingly against her ethnicity back in those times (*Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing*, *Duel in the Sun*).

"She was also Sally Kellerman's best friend!" I reminded Kevin.

Of course the Sally connection + Liv Ullmann's *Changing* made me really want to do a *Lost Horizon* themed play. I thought these would be real winners, but when I put it out there, Kevin didn't bite.

I guess we already had our own Shangri-la with the Poet's Theatre, a paradise that made us feel young and alive, even if we long-term participants did start to notice that the ingénue roles were passing on to

new blood. I graduated from the young, new-to-the-city window dresser in *Diamonds and Rust* (my first role) to Andrew Cunanan, to Johnny Thunders. Then a leap in age and gender to Helena von Helen, washed-up ballerina, back to Jim Nabors, and, finally, to Mrs. Danvers from Rebecca.

We would all wait for our entrance in the dark backstage, trying to make out my highlighted queue in the script by the light someone else's tiny flashlight. Hear the queue. "Why look, It's Will, from *Will and Grace*!" Then you make your entrance, as big as you can. And land in the light. I think that Kevin always appreciated that. He knew you were a star—he's made you one—and he expected you to act like one. Like him.

Kevin Killian & Wayne Smith "Diamonds and Rust"—page 1

KEVIN KILLIAN AND WAYNE SMITH  
DIAMONDS AND RUST

Characters	
God.....	Kevin Killian
Satan.....	Wayne Smith
Pedro, an angel.....	D-I Alvarez
Andromeda, a window dresser.....	Michelle Rollman
Jimmy, a window dresser.....	Rick Jacobsen
Roy, a young, up-and-coming window dresser.....	Rex Ray
Flipper, an extravagant master window-dresser.....	Jonathan Hammer
George Bailey, window dresser and visual artist.....	Craig Goodman
Kent Stewart, stockbroker boyfriend of George.....	Nayland Blake
Dr. Mason Chambers, a psychiatrist, Jimmy's boyfriend.....	Clifford Hengst
Helen, the head of the Decorators Showcase.....	Norma Cole
Bob Jackson-Paris, top model.....	Scott Hewicker
Red Jackson-Paris, top bodybuilder.....	Phillip Horvitz
Isabella Rossellini, Lancome model.....	Phoebe Gloeckner
Mimi, the mother of Andromeda.....	Margaret Crane
Ethel Chase, a wealthy collector and bread heires.....	Herself
Leo Castelli, legendary art dealer.....	?
Mary Boone, another New York dealer.....	Camille Roy
Diamonda Galas, singer.....	Clifford Hengst

[Scene—in Heaven. Enter GOD and SATAN.]

GOD. I've created a perfect world, and when I look down at planet Earth from my throne in Heaven, I especially like looking at San Francisco. It's beautiful!

SATAN [sarcastically]. Yes, isn't it?

GOD. Humpf! It is when you're me—God. Satan, why are you so negative? Look at San Francisco, it's perfect, not a speck of your eviliding in it.

SATAN. Don't speak too soon, God.

GOD. Look at that bridge! Look at that Bay, shimmering in the night like a blue aquamarine. The vintage trolley cars inching their way up Market Street like

POLITICAL ANIMALS  
a play by Kevin Killian

CHARACTERS

BARBARA BUSH, former First Lady.....	Phoebe Gloeckner
ROGER, her Secret Service Agent.....	Clifford Hengst
LIDDY, Mrs. ROBERT DOLE.....	Norma Cole
GUY DABORD, theorist, disguised as Nume.....	Kota Ewata
NANCY REAGAN, former First Lady.....	Leslie Scalapino
DOROTHY ARZNER, film director.....	Ethel Chase
RONALD REAGAN, former President of the U S.....	Wayne Smith
SCOTT O'GRADY, hero of Bosnia who ate bugs to survive.....	Rex Ray
SUSAN MOLINARI, New York Congresswoman.....	Pauline Facciano
JACK KEMP.....	Scott Hewicker
TIFFANY, welfare mother from Staten Island.....	Julia Brashares
ROBIN DOLE, stepdaughter of Liddy.....	Michelle Rollman
PAMELA DIBBY CHURCHILL HEYWARD HARRIMAN, courtesan.....	Nancy Crane
HILLARY CLINTON.....	Karla Milosovich
CHELSEA CLINTON, her daughter.....	Tara Limbaugh
CHRISTOPHER REEVE, former "Superman" of movies.....	Nick Robinson
MARY MATALIN, Republican commentator.....	Margaret Crane
TOM BROKAW, liberal newscaster.....	David Busck
PAULA JONES, preparing her sexual harassment case against Pres. Clinton.....	Alicia Wing
MARGOT KIDDER, former "Lois Lane" of the movies.....	Kate Delos
JIM BRADY, former Chief of Staff of President Reagan, now anti-gun crusader.....	Craig Goodman
SARAH BRADY, his wife.....	Nicole Harrison
BILL CLINTON.....	Kevin Killian

ROGER. Barbara Bush, as I live and breathe!

BARBARA BUSH [sighing]. Another convention! This one in San Diego.

ROGER. This must be your 24th convention, Mrs. Bush.

BARBARA. Or 25th. Tell me, Roger, who's being nominated now?

## MICHELLE ROLLMAN

So much has been said that has spoken to all of us, about Kevin as a writer, about Kevin as a supporter of so many writers and artists, about Kevin's gift for making us all feel like we were stars, about Kevin's incredible relationship with Dodie. Kevin's inclusion of me into the world of Poets Theater gave me laughter, lasting friendships and joyous moments of being a ham. He taught me that it is ok to laugh at what you love and to love the ridiculous in everything (including one's self) with depth and heart. In 1994 he wrote the play *Flophouse* for the tenth anniversary of The Lab. In it we jumped to the future and at the end he wakes to find Dodie telling him it was all a dream. He asks her if he is "more divine than the sun and moon?" She answers that she doesn't "have an answer to that one. Not yet." Jump now to the future again and the answer is most clearly yes. All my love to Dodie and to everyone who was blessed to know Kevin Killian.

### CHARACTERS

Kevin Killian, secretary, Qantu's House of Forks .....	Kevin Killian
Roger, U S Secret Service.....	Kevin Radley
Barbara Bush, U S First Lady.....	Leslie Singer
Empress Farah of Iran, Mrs. Bush's trance channel.....	Norma Cole
Mark Ewert, devoted servant of Empress Farah.....	Mark Ewert
Qantu, proprietor of the House of Forks.....	Jonathan Hammer
Sylvia Plath, his trance channel.....	Margaret Crane
Dodie Bellamy .....	Carla Harryman
Nick Hughes, pretender to the throne of Qantu .....	Glen Helfand



# DIAMONDS AND RUST

A NEW PLAY BY KEVIN KILLIAN AND WAYNE SMITH

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with

**D-L Alvarez**  
**Nayland Blake**  
**Ethel Chase**  
**Norma Cole**  
**Margaret Crane**  
**Phoebe Gloeckner**  
**Craig Goodman**  
**Jonathan Hammer**  
**Clifford Hengst**  
**Scott Hewicker**  
**Philip Horvitz**  
**Rick Jacobsen**  
**Kevin Killian**  
**Rex Ray**  
**Michelle Rollman**  
**Camille Roy**  
**Wayne Smith**

**ONE NIGHT ONLY!**  
**SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 1995**  
**8:00 P.M.**  
**NEW LANGTON ARTS**  
**1246 FOLSOM STREET**  
**SAN FRANCISCO**

GEORGE. *Diamonds and Rust? Wasn't that a song by, oh, what's her name?*

ANGEL. *Men have given me many names. But you can call me Pedro. I have been everything from A to Z for men of all nations...but let's not talk about the alphabet, George. Let's talk about the future.*

ROY. *"Huge" is just one word that doesn't begin to describe Bob and Rod Jackson-Paris!*

ISABELLA ROSSELLINI. *You keep talking as if someone were in the room—but who? And I hear the voices, two squeaky voices, like bats on the ceiling of the Vatican.*

HELEN. *Did I turn my crockpot off when I left the house?*

FLIPPER. *I used to have all my clothes made by Dolce et Gabbana. Now I wear rags. I host fleas, not charity galas.*

DIAMANDA GALAS. *I hear your great howl of sorrow — like the slaughter of the minks!*

**FEATURING "THE WINDOWS OF THE WORLD"**  
**AS PERFORMED BY DIONNE WARWICKE AND SCOTT WALKER**

*scripts courtesy of Michelle Rollman*

"Alfred Hitchcock"/Steve Poitrine.....	Clifford Hengst
Billy Hammer.....	Jonathan Hammer
Marcella Devlin.....	Margaret Crane
Chita du Sumatra.....	Phoebe Gloeckner
Devlin.....	Wayne Smith
Stephanie, Princess of Monaco.....	Elton Siskowitz
Tippi Hedren.....	Mary Gaiskill
Melanie Griffith.....	Andrea Juno
Andy Griffith.....	Rex Ray
Isabelle Rossellini.....	Caroline Asar
Janie Lee Curtis.....	Scott Hewicker
Janie Lee Curtis.....	Michelle Rollman
Karl Lagerfeld.....	D-L Alvarez

[MARCELLA, BILLY, CHITA and STEVE POITRINE onstage]

STEVE (as "ALFRED HITCHCOCK"). Good evening.

BILLY. Oh, my God, it's Alfred Hitchcock.

MARCELLA (satisfied). Billy, hush, I'm trying to concentrate.

BILLY (TO CHITA). Mother's been a trance medium for twenty-five years, but never before has she been able to bring anyone over from the other side.

STEVE (as "ALFRED HITCHCOCK"). Good evening. [Steps forward onstage and addresses audience, as himself.] I'm not really Hitchcock—I'm me . . . Steve Poitrine! But what could I do? I was young—22—cob reporter for the *Berkeley Times*—helplessly in love with a married woman [places hands on MARCELLA's shoulders]—an older woman—Marcella Devlin, who I met at a mixer. At thirty, Marcella Devlin had the complex charm of a hot social setting with brandy and trout.

CHITA (regarding STEVE). He's a big man—with big face.

STEVE (as "ALFRED HITCHCOCK"). Good evening.

BILLY. Mother! Does Daddy know? [TO CHITA] Daddy is the director of the Berkeley Film Archive, and he's planning this big Hitchcock Festival April 2.

MARCELLA (eyes closed). No, "Daddy" doesn't know! And don't tell him!

BILLY. I'm his right hand man.

CHITA (admiringly). Billy Hammer, you clever, sadistic bastard.

Kevin Killian/Flophouse: the First Sixty Years of the Lab—page 1

## CAST

Laura Brun, Executive Director of Lab.....	Margaret Crane
Michelle Rollman, her assistant.....	Phoebe Gloeckner
Kevin Killian, board member.....	Wayne Smith
Ethel Chase, wealthy art collector.....	Ethel Chase
Andrew Lloyd Webber.....	Cliff Hengst
Philip, his assistant.....	Phillip Horvitz
Jennifer Jason Leigh.....	Andrea Juno
Olivia Newton-John.....	Laurie Annat
Dr. Cornelius.....	David E. Johnston
Danied Day Lewis.....	Jonathan Hammer
Michelle Rollman (as an old woman).....	Michelle Rollman
My Tyler Moore.....	Erin Courtney
Joe-Peter Widkin.....	Scott Hewicker
Orfan.....	Norma Cole
"Tommy Lee Jones".....	Kevin Radley
Laura (Riding) Jackson.....	Laura Moriarty
Dodie Bellamy.....	Herself

## ACT ONE

LAURA BRUN (to Board members). Welcome to another meeting of all Lab Board members. From left to right, we have [She names all Board Members present]. I, of course, am Executive Director Laura Brun. [Applause from Members.] Yes, thank you. Kevin, have you prepared your report on the first ten years of The Lab?

KEVIN KILLIAN. I'm trying to write this play, see, about the history of The Lab, but I'm just not that enthused. Sorry, Laura.

LAURA BRUN. Ten years of history, and you're "not enthused"? —And you're "sorry, Laura"? Board, give me trouble. Over and over I've had your vote of confidence, or, as the French say, *le vote de confiance*. Is Michelle Rollman here?

MICHELLE ROLLMAN. Yes, Laura.

LAURA BRUN. Isn't she sweet? She's my—well, I forget what she is right now, but she and Zoey Kroll assist me in all I do in the name of The Lab. Michelle, is Ethel Chase outside?

MICHELLE. Yes, Laura.

LAURA BRUN. Yes, Miss Laura. Give me *vingt seconds* then fetch her, will you?

## KEVIN KILLIAN/LESLIE SCALAPINO scenes from STONE MARMALADE

Eurydice, queen of Hell.....	Lisa Robertson
Kathy, her assistant.....	Andrea (don't know her surname)
Giorgio Argamben, author of <i>Language and Death</i> .....	Charles Watts
Orpheus.....	Dave Ayre
Intercom.....	Maxine Gadd
Julia Roberts, star of <i>Pretty Woman</i> and <i>Flawless</i> .....	Catriona Strang
Neighbour.....	Scott Watson
Second Neighbor.....	Susan Clark

presented Kootenay School of Writing, Vancouver, Saturday, December 5, 1994

[EURYDICE is discovered onstage—seen cleaning up the kitchen with her helper, KATHY.]

EURYDICE. Holy Christ, can that mob eat. Thanks for helping me cleaning up this mess in the kitchen.

KATHY. Never again.

EURYDICE. Did you see them pounding down that Evian.

KATHY. And my cheese puffs gone—sucked up—in less than five minutes. Never again. Don't think of asking me again.

EURYDICE. I don't know about you, Kathy, but it does my heart good to see hungry people fending for themselves.

KATHY (reaches for her hair). Who are they? I've never seen them in the neighborhood.

EURYDICE. Lemmings. We're all lemmings, snatching at the Roquefort of life. Can I remind you of some important, theatrical, facts? I am Eurydice, queen of Hell, and I have a position to maintain. We're all flatliners here.

## ISLAND OF LOST SOULS

### CHARACTERS

Gabrielle Kerouac, struggling Lesbian single mother.....	Michelle Rollman
Jack Kerouac, failed beat novelist and alcoholic.....	Kevin Killian
Jeff, agent with William Morris.....	Glen Helfand
Joey Buttafanno, teenage paperboy.....	Scott Hewicker
William S. Burroughs, sinister novelist, wife murderer.....	Phillip Horvitz
Sunny von Bulow, heiress, diabetic.....	Alicia Wing
Claus von Bulow, suspicious husband.....	Rex Ray
Clarice, Countess von Bulow.....	Barbara Guest
Yulia Andrews, restless British superstar.....	Leslie Scalapino
John Sumac, Peruvian soprano and has-been.....	Clifford Hengst
Anais Nin, international gadabout and diarist.....	Phoebe Gloeckner
Sister Bertille, Mother Confessor of San Tanco.....	Hoa Nguyen

SCENE. Long Island home of Gabrielle Kerouac and her son, Jack. Gabrielle is an elegant, haggard woman of advancing years. Her son is about 35, a drunken wreck of a man who spends all his time staring out of a big armchair, a little by his side.

As the curtain goes up GABRIELLE is fiddling with an umbrella, while Jack sits drunk in his armchair.

GABRIELLE. Heavy rains are dashing my hopes for a picnic but it's still a fine day here at the Kerouac home, in Northport, Long Island. The first fine day in a long, long time. Jack!

JACK. A squat room—in a wet house.

GABRIELLE. [To audience] That's my son, the beat genius. He's been in kind of a fog for ten years. Wake up, Jack! It's a new dawn—a new day for us both.

JACK. My name is . . . Jack.

## ANNE MCGUIRE

Kevin would often have us do read-throughs of his plays during his wife Dodie Bellamy's writing workshop at their house. I remember those as fun, loose affairs where the cast of characters outnumbered the writing group. We were encouraged to jump in and snatch up additional roles as Kevin's sometimes long plays unfolded, revealing more and more characters as we sat closely together in their cozy art and book-filled living room. This is where the term 'workshopping' took on life for me: Kevin is working on his play and this is a workshop where he gets to work it out before it hits the stage; like getting hit on the head with a rock in this very direct, practical, magical, silly, and happy learning environment. Thanks, Kevin.



*Anne McGuire, Rex Ray, & Cliff Hengst in Geyser*

## WAYNE SMITH

I think that Kevin Killian's love of movies and their stars was likely the main impetus behind his playwriting. I had the pleasure of being in many of his Poets Theatre plays over the years, and always appreciated the way he was influenced by the dialogue and plot motifs of classic Hollywood films. He also seemed to delight in being the star-maker when he cast and directed his plays, and of course everybody who was cast in them was delighted to be one of Kevin's stars for a night.

Other times, Kevin really loved being the star himself. Nature itself seemed to put him in the limelight, and while in it he was generous to his audience. I first heard him read at Southern Exposure in 1989 and was struck by how his delivery was both so performative and conversational; I'd never seen or heard anything quite like it. The introductions to his poems were as engaging as the poems themselves. He knew how to pepper them with brief asides (sometimes mid-poem), when to take a pause, when to look out at the audience and push his long, black hair back for emphasis. A couple years after that reading, I watched him on the big screen at The Roxie in Cecilia Dougherty's video *Coal Miner's Daughter*. Shot in Fisher-Price Pixelvision, he played the mean and abusive patriarch of a family on the skids. Even in that video's low-res grayscale, his performance was vivid. I was taken aback by how completely he was able to transform himself in that part.

Performing in some of Kevin's plays at Rick Jacobsen's Kiki Gallery followed in the early 90s. Those were the greatest of fun in perhaps the saddest of times. When better to put on a show? We wrote our first play together, "Diamonds and Rust," around then, too. It was partly a

response to the curious fundraising campaigns that were springing up around AIDS charities at that time. The play was written very much in the spirit of Kiki's exhibition "Sick Joke: Humor, Sarcasm and Irony in the Second AIDS Decade," so it was fitting that we cast Rick as one of its leads. An hour before the performance at New Langton Arts, we got a phone call from Rick, telling us he was too ill to go onstage. His voice had been growing increasingly hoarse in rehearsal, but in the call we learned that he had just been diagnosed with a lung infection. Kevin stepped in and took over the part on the spot, oddly delivering lines in the strained, raspy voice we'd just heard Rick speak to us in on the phone. At the time, I didn't really understand why Kevin performed the part that way, but now it seems like quite a lovely thing to have done. I wonder if he just wanted Rick to still be onstage in some way, even if only to be channeled through him in that depleted audio form? Regardless, I think this demonstrated Kevin's ability to absorb anything that was thrown at him and quickly incorporate it into his art.

As much as Kevin loved being on stage, I think he was equally at home as the member of a rapt audience. He attended almost everything, it seemed. Art openings, readings, Summer blockbusters. In the early 2000s, we took in a few movies at the Metreon. For some reason, he wanted to see *Miracle*, a Disney film starring Kurt Russell. In the movie, Russell's character plays a hockey coach at the 1980 Winter Olympics. He guides the men's US team to a come-from-behind victory against the USSR. Kevin lightly cheered and clapped along with the sparse theatre crowd every time the US made a goal during the film's climax. Another time, when we saw *Moulin Rouge*, I looked over at him during the film's big finale and saw that his eyes looked a little wet. "This is the third time I've seen it," he told me.



*Dodie Bellamy & Karla Milosevich in Wet  
Paint, SFMOMA*

## TANYA HOLLIS

I remember the excitement about Kevin, and Poets Theater, in Buffalo.

I remember when Kevin sent a magnet home to me from Niagara Falls: Tanya with a rainbow.

I remember feeling terrified, then thrilled, my first time onstage in *The Shakers*.

I remember the popcorn owl.

I remember going to Thrift Town for a costume.

I remember wearing trash bags and crawling on the floor.

I remember Hi Tanya. This is Kevin Killian calling. I'm wondering if you'd like to be in my new play. As Susan Smith—you remember her. The one that drove into the lake with her kids? You'd be perfect!

I remember meeting Cliff, Karla, Scott, Rex, Craig, Gerald, Laurie, Colter, Anne...

I remember waiting backstage.

I remember drinking too much backstage and stumbling up the stairs.

I remember realizing I hadn't looked up from my script for most of the play.

I remember realizing that I had no lines, but did not have an exit.

I remember knowing that there was no exit.

I remember Kevin's wavering voice, singing "Windmills of My Mind."

I remember having drinks on stage during The Judds.

I remember Valerie Solanas. I remember Hanna Schygulla. I remember Naomi Judd. I remember Susan Smith. I remember Mrs. Dickinson. I've forgotten others.

I remember sitting at the kitchen table in the sunlight, with Kevin, typing furiously to keep up as he wrote our play out loud.

I remember Kevin laughing at his own jokes.

I remember shortening the play, and Kevin insisting that all of the stars needed more lines.

I remember Craig's hands with too many fingers.

I remember Cliff as Iman. Laurie as Lucille Ball. Karla as Kitty and her show Kitty Corner.

I remember forgetting to have an accent, or having a terrible French accent/English accent/German accent.

I remember realizing I didn't have the most recent script on stage.



I remember not knowing where to stand on stage.

I remember losing my place, and realizing it didn't matter.

I remember Kevin in the audience, mouthing the lines, waiting for the audience's reaction to the punchline.

I remember rehearsing in Rex's studio in the early morning light.

I remember Kevin's Birdwell bag, stuffed with scripts and highlighters.

I remember Kevin's pure joy at seeing us singing at the end, even when we forgot the words.

I remember learning what it meant to make your own world when this one became too drab and cruel.

I remember, Kevin. Thank you.

## STEVE ORTH

Up until 2009, I was a musician. But for many various reasons, I was tired of it and wanted to write a new chapter in my story. I had a few ideas on that next chapter. My first idea was to finally join the poets! In a strange twist of fate, all of my friends were poets and I had recently fallen in love with a wonderful poet. And poetry was fun to write.

Another idea was to become a talk show host. I had an excellent idea for a talk show. It would be one of those very serious talk shows with serious questions, serious guests. Kind of *Charlie Rose*-ish. But the whole time that we're having our serious discussions, we're also eating ribs. Big fat covered-in-BBQ sauce RIBS. The show was to be called *Ribs with Steve*.

I was serious about this idea. But poetry won. It sort of fell in my lap more. Basically, I saw a community that was waiting for me. The doors were already open, if I wanted to walk through. *Ribs with Steve*, on the other hand, was more difficult. I would need a crew. I would need guests. I would need a space. It felt like an isolating project. I wanted a community. Becoming a poet was easier than becoming a talk show host. And I'm kind of lazy and so, I became I a writer.

Fast forward five years later. I'm at a bar after a Small Press Traffic reading, my poet life is very nice. I have lots of poet friends. And the expectations are low. I'm having drinks with Lindsey, Syd, and Samantha. For whatever reason, Lindsey tells them about my concept for *Ribs with Steve*. They love it! They say I have to do it! I say, "no way!" Samantha tells me that I will do a live version of *Ribs with Steve* next month at

SPT's annual Poets Theater. Their enthusiasm is contagious and I agree, on one condition!

I told them that there's only one person out there who could be my guest. The one and only Kevin Killian. If Kevin says yes, I'll do it.

Kevin made perfect sense for this. I had acted in Kevin's plays many times, and him in a few of mine. And I needed someone that knew how to be on-stage, someone to give it a sense of show biz glamour. He also was a not a vegetarian, which was key! I emailed Kevin and he was elated. *Ribs with Steve* was on!

Kevin and I went to a French restaurant in the SOMA district to hash out the details of our show. What kind of questions I would ask and what kind of tone we wanted. Over our lunch, we set up the whole thing. The beginning of the show, we would mostly talk about Kevin's latest book, *Eyewitness*, which was a book length interview with Carolyn Dunn. Then our conversation would turn to *Tagged*. For those not familiar, *Tagged* was a photo project. Kevin would get guys from all over the world to pose naked with a drawing of a cock by Raymond Pettibon over their crotch. I had done *Tagged*; Kevin photographed me in my apartment in Oakland. I even wore a Buster Keaton mask during some of the shots.

During *Ribs with Steve*, I would pretend that I didn't know what *Tagged* was. The lights would dim, and Kevin would present the audience a slide show of some of *Tagged's* greatest photos of hot naked guys. I would pretend to be slightly outraged by the nudity. And then I would really lose it when the guy in the Buster Keaton mask would appear. But then it would be revealed that I was the man in the mask! And I would

demand the lights be turned on and I would quickly end the show. The audience would explode with laughter at my faux embarrassment.

We were all set to go. I had made the ribs that afternoon. I was wearing a suit. Kevin was feeling good and had a thumb drive full of pictures of naked hot guys. We were scheduled to close the show. We grabbed some seats. Lots of people started to come into Timken Hall. Lots of people. And lots of people's kids. I saw more and more parents with children coming into the theater. I thought about the thumb drive. "Oh no!" I whispered to myself.

At the intermission, I pulled Kevin aside. In a panic, I said, "Kevin, there's like a shit ton of kids here, we can't do our ending. We can't show pics of hot naked guys to these kids!" Kevin was incredulous! "Why are there kids at Poets Theater? There shouldn't be children here." "But they are here! We have to change the ending, Kevin. I'm really uncomfortable showing pictures of myself naked to these children." Kevin, then grabbed me by the hand and said in a very calming voice, "It's okay, how about I close the show by performing my signature song, 'Send in The Clowns?'"

That is word for word what Kevin said. "It's okay, how about I close the show by performing my signature song, 'Send in The Clowns?'" And he said it in such a Kevin way that it is etched into my brain forever. He had this long pause between "by" and "performing." I had no idea that "Send In The Clowns" was his signature song. And the fact that he had a signature song blew my mind. This was exactly the show-biz glamour I had needed. It was perfect.

We finally took the stage and with two plates full of hot ribs and a roll of paper towels on the desk, the show went wonderful. A huge success. We ad-libbed and talked and had great chemistry on stage together. Kevin did close our show by singing “Send in The Clowns.” I sat there at my desk in awe, still chewing on those delicious ribs. I looked out into the audience and there were no children there. Did they go home? Did I imagine them? It didn’t matter at this point, because our ending was amazing. It was a fantastic night and my dream of hosting a talk show was fulfilled. I think the only complaint I have is that Kevin didn’t really eat that many ribs. He ate like one single rib. I mean the name of the show is *Ribs with Steve*. The point is to eat a lot of ribs while having a serious conversation. I guess it’s okay.



*Steve & Kevin after Ribs with Steve*

## LINDSEY BOLDT

It's 2010 and I'm squished "back stage" in the three or so feet of hallway behind the cement slab stage in Timken Hall, whispering with Jocelyn and Karla, hoping no one in the audience can hear us, but not taking it so seriously that we stop. I'm wearing a bright orange empire waist gown that is supposed to be floor length, but hangs to my ankles and doesn't quite zip at the neck, and a silver sequined tiara—both provided by Jocelyn and her glorious dress-up closet. I'm about to give what I think of as my "big speech." I'm playing Eurydice, Queen of Hell, in *Stone Marma-lade*, the play Kevin Killian co-wrote with Leslie Scalapino in the 90's.

During rehearsal, I had made the mistake (again) of asking Kevin for more information about my character. I might have well have asked, "What's my motivation?" I wish I could remember exactly what he said, but I'm sure if you've performed in one of Kevin's plays, you've probably asked something similar and received a similar response, "Don't worry about it! Just have fun!" I was going through a very late-20's ambitious stage and had secretly rehearsed on my own and tried to memorize a little bit. If I had known how to method act being Queen of Hell, I would have. In the back of my mind lived the guilty hope that someone might see my performance and pluck me out of poetry community obscurity. Lol.

In the email inviting me to join the cast, Kevin said, "I'd like you to play the leading role of Eurydice, the queen of hell. You run the duty free shop in hell and in general welcome new visitors, etc. It is a bizarre play, half by me, half by her, but it makes remarkable sense. Hope you can see your way clear to saying yes. xxx Kevin K."

Of course I said yes. I was still fairly new to San Francisco, having arrived in January of 2007, and while I can't remember how I first met Kevin, I do remember getting to know him and Dodie through Dodie's summer workshops. During one workshop, we read through Kevin's new play *The Shakers* in their living room, seated on folding chairs, pausing here and there for Kevin to explain a little backstory—"It's all about those famous Shaker chairs! You know the ones!" (I'm paraphrasing) As he spoke, his gestures animated and electrified the air and the story of a Shaker community ripped apart by the revelation of a sordid love triangle (or quadrangle?) came to life. Speaking of being electrified, my favorite scene in *The Shakers* is near the end when (spoiler alert) Jocelyn, seated alone on stage in a chair, screams and hollers, shaking and thrashing as her character is electrocuted for her misdeeds. Unforgettable.

"I need to start watching some Mae West films," I had said in an email to Kevin about my first role as Belle Adore, the Mae West style femme fatale in *The Shakers*. No I didn't! But I wanted to impress him. He made me feel like a starlette, like I was one of his ingénues, along with Karla and Jocelyn, and Laurie, and Cliff (and so many others) like I had already been plucked from obscurity and brought into the limelight of artistic freakdom. And thank goodness, because I desperately needed to make sense somewhere.

Honestly, I think it was during this time, when I was a regular cast-member in Kevin's plays, and writing and staging plays myself, that I felt the most like an artist, a star, someone worthy of the space I occupied, and the most willing to take up that space. Since Kevin died, I've been plunged back into the feeling space of these memories, like they're a substance I can sink into and swim in, which feels like a parting

gift from Kevin, to be reminded of how he made so many of us feel like stars worthy of the stage and sky.

In an email written to thank the cast of *Stone Marmalade*, Kevin wrote,

“Everyone was splendid and I think, despite the difficulty of the material, had a great time—those who didn’t walk out—but daddy always said, if a few don’t walk out, then it didn’t really happen, and this time it happened for real!”

Kevin really helped me feel real, when I honestly felt like I might blow away with a gust of wind, like I was happening for real and he was there to witness it and encourage me to keep happening alongside him and all the other people he animated and electrified.

Thank you, Kevin.



*Kevin, Steve Orth, Lindsey, and Sara Larsen in Escape from Century Hills*



## MAXE CRANDALL

The last performance of *Box of Rain* confirmed for me that Poets Theater, the way Kevin imagined it, is always site-specific—twisty love letters to the exact time and place of the performance to come. I see now that I make performance the way I learned, even intuited, from him: Poets Theater as act of devotion. Action-collaborations based in mutuality not without contests of taste and scene-y (anti-scene) social critique. Then, there's the vast world behind the scenes composed too in codes of queer adoration. The emails we exchanged in the weeks before the show so serious in turns from surface to depth and back again. The process was so forward-forward-easy, both in distraction from and full acknowledgment of what was happening. In his plays I think we experience the full range of Kevin's aesthetic, which is truly multi-dimensional, deliciously/mercilessly meta-meta, and effortlessly real. All surface, all heart, our hero of underground theater.

May 29, 2019 at The Stud, San Francisco

Bar of One's Own, curated by James Fleming and Mica Sigourney

MARY MULHAIR, director of the Rumaker Gallery // Diana Cage

RACHEL RUMAKER, her boss // Laurie Reid

RYAN TREE COLLINS // Randall Mann

JASON JOHANSON, apparently his boyfriend, actually his son // Kevin Killian

JORDAN GADGET, police inspector investigating a theft // Hope Mohr

SIRI, computerized voice of a smart phone // Cliff Hengst

HEIDI BROAN, reporter for the Nob Hill Gazette // Trisha Low

PABLO PICASSO, the modernist painter // Dia Felix

RODNEY, the inventor of the fax // Maxe Crandall  
THOMAS KINKADE, the painter of light // Anne Walsh  
DORA MAAR, French painter and photographer // Claudia La Rocco  
THIEF, a child of nine or ten maybe // Ari Baniyas  
& introducing the FAX MACHINE // Mara Poliak & Margit Galanter



*Kevin in his last performance, with Cliff Hengst as Siri, in Box of Rain at The Stud, dir. Maxe Crandall, photo by Scott Hug*

## ARNOLD J. KEMP

On December 2, 2016 Kevin asked me and 11 people I had never met before to act out his play *Box of Rain* during the second annual Poets Theater Festival at Links Hall in Chicago. He had put some thought into the cast and acknowledged that some roles were so negligible that they needed no rehearsal. He also wrote: “I was afraid at first to bring our puny little SF Poets Theater—so crumby and contingent—to big brawny professional Chicago, but I hope with your help to give my play a new spin.” Kevin’s humility floored me, and I was surely nervous as a character with one of the bigger roles.

On December 10, we had one rehearsal just two hours before the actual performance that evening. The house was packed. Many people had to sit on the floor. Dodie and Kevin’s sister were there to see the show. Barrett Watten and Carla Harryman were also there, and I remember Barrett laughing aloud at my portrayal of Detective Gadget. I was knocked out that Kevin would ask me to be in one of his plays, and I was even more knocked out by the success of the performance and Kevin’s email of thanks afterwards. He wrote:

Hi there you guys!

Dodie and I are back now out of the storms of Chicago and back in pokey little San Francisco.

I wanted to write posthaste and try to express some of my deep pleasure and gratitude to all of you for making my little play such a success. When Patrick Durgin proposed I put

something on in Chicago I jumped at the chance because from previous visits I knew there was an incredible range of wonderful artists—poets, painters, curators, scholars, filmmakers, dancers, musicians—a cadre of talent that leaves me gasping with wonder, and here I was, able to round up a dozen of you to perform on a bare bones budget of zero, for a coterie audience, and to go to new places by making fools of yourselves on stage—I knew it would be great but in what particular ways I did not expect. You didn't even all know each other—that must say something about the depth of the talent pool you have nourished there. I am feeling very emotional, as most of us are I suppose since the election of Trump, and a gesture like your work on *Box of Rain* really showed me something of the beauty and power of art. Anyhow believe me if there is any way I can return the enormous courtesy and generosity you showed me, please let me try to do it. Until then, I'll be in your debt as ever,

xxx Kevin K.

Kevin. He was so generous in his breathless thanks. It left me believing we were the best and brightest stars. For Kevin I am sure that we were.



*from top: Kevin, Dodie, & Laurie Reid; Karla  
Milosevich & Kevin; Kevin & Laurie Reid*

**CARLA HARRYMAN** QUERIES **LEE ANN BROWN** AND **TONY TORN**  
about the performance of Kevin Killian's *Box of Rain*, and more  
at the Polyphonic Poetry Festival, Cambridge

**Carla:** You sent me three vimeos of Kevin and Dodie's trip to Cambridge, where you had curated the Polyphonic Poetry Festival, a Poets Theater and song festival: one is of Kevin's *Box of Rain*<sup>1</sup>, another of Dodie's play *Turn on the Heat*, and a third of *Dodie & Kevin Visit Wittgenstein*. We also discover in the vimeos that Julie Patton and others are participating in the festival as they perform in *A Box of Rain* along with the two of you and several Cambridge students. The whole thing looks like great fun. A *Box of Rain* was also performed at the Poets Theater Festival in Chicago in 2017 and at The Stud just this May, for the launch of Kevin's selected plays *Stage Fright*. It is the last play in the collection.

I would love to hear anything you might have to say about the selection of *Box of Rain* for the Cambridge performance. The title is taken from a Grateful Dead song, and also there are a couple of lines from the Dead song that inspired Kevin: "inch your way through dead dreams/to another land." Often the living and the dead mix it up in Kevin's writing. I know also that Kevin was commissioned to write the play, and that there was a requirement in the commission that a fax machine be prominent

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<sup>1</sup> You can watch some of the plays discussed here by visiting the links below:  
*Box of Rain*: <https://vimeo.com/344790762>  
*Dodie and Kevin Visit Wittgenstein*: <https://vimeo.com/344790762>  
*Turn on the Heat* by A.A. Fair: <https://vimeo.com/344935815>  
*The Magic Workshop*: <https://vimeo.com/372109519>

in the piece. But I'm interested in how Kevin and the performers talked about the piece, or if they did so, beyond or other to this information. And I'd love to hear anything you would have to say about how Kevin directed the play (I am assuming he directed as he is not in the play), and how the Cambridge performers, who would be less familiar with his performances, interacted with the work. For instance, how did they relate to the casual style of his Poets Theater? In the performance it's clear that everybody was very much enjoying themselves.

I am also interested in hearing anything you might say about Kevin's idea of community and theater and how that translates to the Cambridge events. The relationship of the audience to the performance in his work is one in which people in the audience are watching friends or people in their own community perform. While this may sometimes be true in other small theater and Poets Theater performances, there is a particular way that Kevin plays with the sense that the performers come from the same world as the audience. (Does that make sense?).

Please feel free to take these questions in any direction you wish, as I think readers will welcome anything you might have to say about Kevin's presence and work in Cambridge and the festival you put together more generally.

**Lee Ann:** Yes, Tony and I invited Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy to be the centerpiece of the Polyphonic Poetry Festival on June 15th & 16th, 2018 at the end of my residency as the Judith E. Wilson Poetry Fellow. When they first arrived they did a talk on New Narrative, and then took part in a reading of Helen Adam's play *The Magic Workshop*. We asked Kevin to play Robert Duncan, and he looked shocked. "You KNOW I'm TEAM SPICER" he replied, but

he gave a brilliant performance, kind of sending up Duncan with creepy unfocused eyes. The next night Kevin directed Dodie's play *Turn on the Heat* by A.A. Fair, followed by his own play *Box of Rain*.

Cast list from Cambridge production of *Box of Rain*, written and directed by Kevin Killian, at the Judith E. Wilson Drama Studio, as part of the Polyphonic Poetry Festival:

MARY MULHAIR, director of the Rumaker Gallery: SOPHIE SEITA  
RACHEL RUMAKER, her boss: GIZEM OKULU

RYAN TREE COLLINS: DAVID GRUNDY

JASON JOHANSON, apparently his boyfriend, actually his son: JOEL LUCYSZYN

JORDAN GADGET, police inspector investigating a theft: TONY TORN

SIRI, computerized voice of a smart phone: KYOO LEE

HEIDI BROAN, reporter for the Nob Hill Gazette: LEE ANN BROWN

PABLO PICASSO, the modernist painter: DANIEL KANE

RODNEY, the inventor of the fax: DANIEL KATZ

THOMAS KINKADE, the painter of light: JONATHAN SKINNER

DORA MAAR, French painter and photographer: JULIE PATTON

THIEF, a child of nine or ten maybe: WILL HALL

TONY & LEE ANN in conversation:

**Tony:** I'm going to posit that Kevin Killian is our Oscar Wilde ... how does that work? He is creating work that is comedic in nature, that comes out of a specific society—in his case he is writing from inside the creative community of San Francisco, but he's also part of the commu-



nity of the world—it's a perfect example of the specific becoming the universal with his work; his work is so totally specific all the time that his point of view and his cultural understanding becomes universal in my butt (well, we're transcribing live with Google dictation so keep that in!) Okay so what did I say that turned into "my butt?" In my VIEW, in my thought, but Google said "in my butt" so we're going to keep it like that.

LA: One thing that struck me about your comparison of Kevin to Oscar Wilde is of course that Oscar Wilde is English and I thought it was funny to hear this San Francisco play done with all these mostly British accents and there's definitely a small coterie over the years of Cambridge poets so it's related to that idea of poets playing themselves, and also playing characters but in a very different little fish pond "over the pond." We were doing it with a mixture of actors, some of whom were American, like we've got you and me and Julie Patton and Jonathan Skinner and Will Hall's American, there's Kyoo Lee, plus Daniel Katz and Daniel Kane, who are Americans living in the U.K., along with a lot of British performers like David Grundy and Joel Lucyszyn, and of course Sophie Seita is German but sounds British! Also, in Dodie's Bellamy's play *Turn On The Heat by A.A. Fair*, performed on the same night, her San Francisco noir was suddenly populated by European poet performers like Redell Olsen, Susan Rudy, Amy Evans, and others. They just copy-pasted these San Francisco plays into a Cambridge milieu; the approach to the whole thing was typically sort of open and experimental, curious.

T: *Box of Rain* is a play set in an art gallery in San Francisco, where a Picasso has just been stolen, and features a fax machine that can receive messages from the dead. The title, taken from a famous Grateful Dead song, is one of the many San Francisco in-jokes in the play. Kevin chose

the play; we asked him what he wanted to do and he said “let’s do *Box of Rain*” and there was not a lot of discussion over it, we just went about casting. He had a lot of suggestions, and we gathered a company together. His approach was always a very offhand one: he just comes in and says okay, let’s put this on.

LA: Offhand and Charming. In the brief introduction at the beginning when Kevin is speaking about the play, he’s talking about the Grateful Dead song and then he talks about the song from the musical *Chess* and he engages with the audience and ask them to actually sing the song, to come up and sing it so it’s like he’s letting people know in the audience that they could just as easily be in the play as in the audience.

T: Speaking as somebody who mainly does theater myself, it was interesting to me that Kevin’s approach was very much just very practical about everything. We didn’t spend a lot of time talking about the theory behind Poets Theater; he just basically assumed that we were just going to come together in a short period of time to present the play in a not fussy way. “You stand here and now it’s probably better if you get up here.” Just basically stuff to keep us all from running into each other. We joked a little bit about the fact that I was a professional actor, so in many ways I was supposedly not allowed to be in the play, according to the Poets Theater manifesto that’s published in *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater: 1945-1985*, edited by Kevin and David Brazil. There are very strict rules, and one of them is NO ACTORS! But the rules are being made by people who have a lot of fun breaking rules in the first place!

LA: One of the other things the manifesto talks about is that it’s not a good idea to videotape. It doesn’t matter if you have a fun time; it doesn’t look good on video tape! We recommend if you watch the video

that we have on Vimeo of the performance in Cambridge that you have the script handy as you watch. *Box of Rain* is also in the new collection of Kevin's plays, *Stage Fright* (Kenning Editions, 2019).

T: Theater is what happens in a room with actual people, that's what makes it special, and this is true of theater in general but it's specifically true of what Kevin is wanting to achieve when he gets people together to perform the shows. It's really about what we can all do as an instant community; you know, just add water and poets and you have an event and the play is an excuse for people to come together and have social intercourse.

LA: Performing in Kevin's plays reminds me of drag, when people are performing as famous icons, because we get to pretend like we are these famous people: it's mythic. We are his stars. It reminds me of his obsession with stars and autographs and poets like Jack Spicer who have some kind of mythic quality and of course it reminds me of the home movie we made of going to Wittgenstein's grave. People become mythic in different ways but this is kind of a star quality of a philosopher; it's the specialness of the aura of being in the space with this character projection what you your ideas of who this person is and how you would relate to them and you're in the same space with them in the graveyard.

T: When Kevin introduced this play and Dodie's play *Turn On The Heat by A. A. Fair* in Cambridge, he kept referring to the cast as his new "stars" and that's a major part of his attitude; the play is a framing for people to be celebrated, both the people depicted in the plays and the people playing them. Kevin's creating a frame; anybody who is in the show steps into a frame of being celebrated and it's not about the usual celebrations of conventional society, not about the things that usually make someone famous, it's a celebration that a particular community

gives to itself. Kevin is all about Poets Theater being a celebration of the coterie; his plays exist because of a specific milieu. When people play these characters they mainly just act as themselves. When someone is playing Pablo Picasso more important for Kevin I think is that it's the person he's asked to play Pablo Picasso doing Pablo Picasso. Daniel Kane had a lot of fun trying out different accents to play Picasso and we had even more fun making fun of his accent. Kevin's not looking for an actor's transformation; he's looking for a filtering based on his true star, which is the person he is putting on stage, and celebrating that person.

LA: ...and revels in either putting people in awkward positions like having to commit incest with each other and things like that.

T: that was very much like Reza Abdoh, the director I worked with for many years; he loved putting people in compromising situations on stage.

LA: It's transgressive, disrupting some social norms but also the way the plays usually work there's a funny flatness to them. You can easily slip into a character like a costume and have fun with it right away!

T: Well it goes back to the Oscar Wilde comparison because many of Kevin's plays to me seem to be old-fashioned comedies of manners but without the old fashioned manners themselves; you know, a lot of the conflicts come from misunderstanding and miscommunication and very soap operas situations... a comedy of manners about the manners of a coterie of experimental writers and artists in a place like San Francisco, so we're not talking about the social faux pas of an uptight conservative society, we're talking about the social slip-ups and conflicts of a more transgressive community in the first place. It's really fun that

we can have our own version of something like *Downton Abbey* but set in the counterculture. Kevin coming to the University of Cambridge in England for me really sharpened the connection between what he does and the more formal comedy of manners that you would see in England, not only with Oscar Wilde but going further back to something like the restoration comedies of Sheridan and Congreve and more modern British comedies of manners like by Joe Orton or Alan Ayckbourn. It's kind of fun because I think that despite the fact that Kevin insisted on being seen outside of the professional theater world, insisting that that work be an expression of an "amateur" aesthetic, I feel that his plays can go toe-to-toe with a celebrated mainstream playwright like Ayckbourn and come out not only equal, but victorious.

LA: And it reminds me also of his long-term project with the drawing of the cock and balls by Raymond Pettibon; he gets different people to pose, mostly men, to pose naked with the drawing in front of their own genitalia. It's like he's putting people in a frame, as in a photo or proscenium, but he's giving them a prompt to see them naked for real and it's a very intimate pleasure; we would normally not get to see these people naked but it's part of an "art project"—they're exposing himself for him and they're putting on these layers of tiny art costume of a special drawing..

T: I think Kevin would enjoy maybe being compared in this activity to the plaster casters that used to go round making plaster casts of rock star dicks.

LA: Jimi Hendrix!

T: You know, one wouldn't call Kevin a big Grateful Dead fan....

LA: No!

T: but he uses the Grateful Dead as a reference mainly because The Dead are so important to the milieu of San Francisco, so Kevin sort of willfully uses the Grateful Dead not as a fan but as somebody who recognizes the reality of cultural capital and the humor of using that as a cultural touchstone for a place in San Francisco. As he said in the intro to the reading, the fax machine really is “a box of rain.”

LA: But also, just think of their name, “The Grateful Dead”...

T: Right, that’s another thing to *Box of Rain*. There’s also just a notion about how people are dealing with mortality, there’s a lot to do with the fax machine that can receive communications from the dead but it’s also in the use of the fax machine—the fax machine itself is a dying technology, so there’s a lot in the piece that’s very vivid about that.

LA: The fax machine reminds me of Jack Spicer receiving language from the Martians, right, like beaming in from the dead Lobster world (Google just said dead Lobster World which we definitely want to keep, from the dead underworld!). Yes, so Kevin is taking Jack Spicer into the modern world, so what if like Jack Spicer we sense the dead or they talk to us—of course they talk to us, through the mothballed fax machine which doesn’t really even work anymore. It’s the equivalent of radio in the car in the Cocteau *Orpheus* movie which Spicer references in *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*. That’s the joke. Kevin said that he got a commission from the guy who invented the fax machine to write the play! And he was nervous about what he would think because they kind of make fun of it, but apparently the patron liked it!

T: I think that my character that I play is based on Inspector Sprocket or something from the Disney movie, and you play a character from a banished world, you're playing like the "cub reporter," you know, you come in there, and you're like "I'm writing to the local paper and I'm going to get to the bottom of the story I'm going to get a real scoop"

LA: The name of my character was Heidi Broan. Kevin might have free-associated her name with mine, besides just knowing I was just like the enthusiastic investigator character he was playing with the name, too.

T: You know, that character is kind of a ghost as well, because God knows the intrepid reporter who's going to get the scoop is a dying breed.

LA: Fake news, fake news.

T: I can't stress enough how anti-precious Kevin was in staging his plays; it was all very practical: okay we're doing this play, okay now you stand here and let's get a chair over there, and oh yeah maybe you should put your head with your ear to the fax machine when this happens... I did the lighting for the plays as well as performing in *Box of Rain*, and I told him, "so Kevin, I've actually come up with three different looks; this is going to be the look for these scenes and then when the ghosts come out there's going to be more of a spooky lighting" and he listened to me and said "oh, okay fine." He's totally uninterested, which is kind of great. People just standing under fluorescent lights is equally valid to him. And also occasionally when he was staging us there would be a moment when we're all kind of at an impasse figuring out how to do something and I would make a suggestion and he would very funny about it, saying, "oh look at mr. theater guy trying to figure out a way to solve the problem in a theatrical way," basically making fun of me, and when I told Dodie

about it she laughed and said “oh I see Kevin topped you a little bit!” So it was my honor to be topped by Kevin.

Lee Ann, what was your first experience working with Kevin?

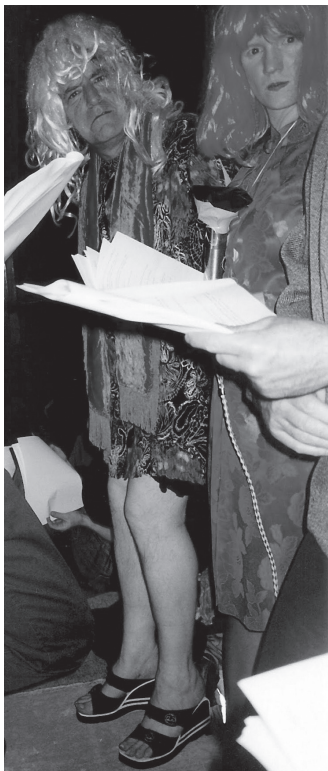
LA: The first time I met him was in San Francisco in the 80's. Kevin and Dodie were like the radical den parents of all the kids from across the country who had run away to San Francisco to be sexually and artistically free. I was living with Julie Regan on a year off from college. I was in San Francisco and I took a semester at the New College of California and volunteered at Small Press Traffic—that's where I met Kevin and Dodie and that was the year they got married but I didn't know them well enough yet to be invited to that. I think I covered SPT when the Jack Spicer conference was on and that's when I first heard about Spicer and I also when I first encountered Poets Theater at Intersection for the Arts with Roberto Bedoya. Later, in the 90's, Kevin asked me to be in one of his plays at The Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church. It was his play *Cut* and I was playing Melanie Griffith, and Lori Weeks was my mother Tippi Hedren. I wore a fur coat, I remember. I was amazed that we only had about an hour rehearsal right before the show and it was basically, stand here, say this, walk over here, say this. I felt very glamorous in that fur coat. Then at Naropa he did *The Last Days of Black Mountain* and I was one of the “hall girls:” it was a commentary on Charles Olson saying that the girls had to stay out in the hall and we would be disrupting everything like mayonnaise—no Google, I said Maenads! In 2013 I was putting together a tribute volume to Black Mountain College and I remembered that play and I asked Kevin if we could publish it and he sent it to me immediately for the book *Far From the Centers of Ambition*, published by Lorimer Press in North Carolina.



I keep remembering more adventures we have had over the years: meeting up at Robin Blaser's 70th Birthday in Vancouver in 1995, coincidental visits to Providence, when we wrote a collaborative poem, "The Dark Prince" in my violet study on East Manning Street, Boulder, Orono, so many times in New York City. As exemplary indie thinkers and doers, Kevin and Dodie are both central to the life and inspiration of Tender Buttons Press: Dodie dedicated her Firecracker Award-winning *Cunt-Ups* to Kevin and both Kevin and Dodie gave me "pussy writing" for Michelle Rollman's *Book of Practical Pussies* that Tender Buttons co-published with Krupskaya. Kevin published early versions of Harryette Mullen's *Trimblings* in *Mirage Period(ical)* too, which became another important Tender Buttons book.

T: One of the plays I really love of Kevin's is a collaboration he did with D-L Alvarez called *Total Eclipse*, which is a play about the scene in the early 80's apartment that Joey Arias shared with Klaus Nomi. It's a look at downtown New York at that time, so we've got characters like Ann Magnuson and Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat and Glenn "BS" O'Brien and all that stuff and it's really funny and amusing, like a sitcom but featuring the kind of characters you always WISHED were in a sitcom but never are and also there's something deeper, there's a great deal of pathos there, you know, Kevin never leans into the pathos in a self-conscious way but he is looking back into a vanished place and time and trying to get us to think what that place and time means to us now. I also think that Kevin's books like *Argento Series* or *Action Kylie* would make incredible theater pieces. Kevin and I had talked about doing an adaptation of *Action Kylie* and I did a workshop with three actors last year and it was really promising. I'm hoping that we get to do it sometime soon. I just think that Kevin is a great source of beauty in his work and that I'd love to find every way possible to continue to

spread the word; whatever way we have to experience Kevin's work I think will enrich everybody. I'm very curious about how that happens. Every time I talked to Kevin about something that wasn't originally intended to be staged, like *Action Kylie*, when I asked him why don't we try to do this or that thing, he always said, "well, that sounds interesting, let's try it." He's always going to have his opinion about the result of the experiment. but he was always pro the experiment. "Let's try it!"



above: *The Pre-Poetic*, 500 Capp, photo by Kevin Killian

SUSAN GEVIRTZ

Poet's Theatre / For Kevin / June 2019

I was never in a Poet's Theatre play but once Kevin asked me to write one. I am eternally grateful to him for asking—among so many other gratitudes in his direction. It was the early 2000's and his timing was perfect because I was going through a divorce and had a lot of drama at hand. I wrote the play *Motion Picture Home* fast and furiously. Kevin directed it. It was complicated because it had a lot of off stage action and talk, visual elements, a teleprompter on stage and a recorded dialogue/narration interspersed. And it was long. Kevin was so stellar. I showed up at many of the rehearsals—which may have only made things harder—but Kevin consulted with me and was compromising but also direct in telling me that he thought it was too long and saying other things I no longer recall but remember their care and usefulness. I fully recall his demeanor of 150% engagement and dedication to the process of directing it. He was attentive and inventive. It was astonishing to watch the work translated from the page to this three-dimensional space of sound and action. And I know that this is an astonishment he has bestowed on so many who have written plays for Poet's Theatre. It was performed at New Langton Arts in 2002. The show opened with a play by Jena Osman and closed with one by Kenward Elmslie who I think had come to SF for the performance. There's no way to thank Kevin enough for being the instigator of all of this. And not just for myself and my play but for so many who wrote for or acted in Poet's Theatre. And for providing so much support of all kinds to so many poets.

## LAYNIE BROWNE

August 23, 2013

Dear Kevin,

Last night I had a dream in which Stacy was talking with you and I and I thought I should pass it along since it seemed some kind of clear communication from her. Maybe it will mean nothing to you. In that case, you are free of it.

In the dream, Stacy was well, and charming and smart and alluring as ever. She was asking you what you were going to do to celebrate your upcoming 50th birthday. You were hesitant to say, but she was jokingly but also seriously prodding you. And eventually you mentioned a place and time for a gathering. She was glad to have succeeded in getting you to (a) create a celebratory plan or (b) to divulge a secret plan. In either case, well, is it almost your birthday? I can't know what this means except that maybe cause for celebration is in order. Stacy wants you to celebrate something.

I should say I've had several dreams with Stacy and also felt her presence at times, her voice speaking to me. She is one of the few people I could always count on for clear headed and daring advice in a manner that I could never conceive of myself. That type of freedom.

By the way also, the poet's novel anthology is coming along and Brandon Brown wrote a terrific piece on your work. I hope that this finds you very well. I hope I'll come to SF sometime in the not too distant.

And I hope you'll come east! Let me know if you ever plan to be in Philadelphia!

xo  
Laynie

\*

August 27, 2013

Dear Laynie, now that's an odd dream, but I love it. Especially love approaching fifty when actually, I turned 60 this past Christmas Eve! Do I really seem that young—maybe it's the kind atmosphere of dreamland in operation.

Dodie is teaching *The Cake Part* this semester in her class about Poetry and History at SF State, so she's been thinking about Stacy as well.

I do wonder what she wants me to celebrate! Did you hear about the play Norma and I wrote, in which Stacy was one of the characters? We put on the play back in March, and many did not care for it, though Norma envisioned it as a celebration of Stacy's blithe spirit.... Did we send you the play (*Afterglow*)? If you'd like to read it I'll be happy to.

Living without her is a great loss because of that pragmatism you speak of, and that knack she had for problem solving.

Thank you for writing me! I was just thinking about Philadelphia and trying to think of ways to get there—you must be settling in by now.

Hope your family is well and that you are thriving,

Love from Kevin K.

\*

August 27, 2013

Dear Kevin,

Yes you seem even younger. Above the nonsense of age. I hate it, losing loved ones, beginning to feel the limits, in other words, getting a clue, moving beyond the innocence of believing in immortality. But it is also good, in the sense of empathy. I guess. Character maybe?

As for celebrating, I think if you are not sure what Stacy wants you to celebrate, maybe celebrate everything you can think of worth celebrating. Waking up, coffee, love, poetry? I'm going to try to. Even though the advice was given to you I did overhear it, and it is good advice.

I saw Norma when she was here in May and we did talk about the play, and Stacy. Though we were in public, just before her reading, and at a dinner with lots of students. I feel like I can't really talk about this loss in public, like I'll still lose it completely. Her visit was brief but terrific. She always inspires me. I have not read the play and would love to see it. Thanks.

Yes, do come to Philadelphia. I'm sure you know the Philly poets already, but please do let me know if I can be of any help.

xo  
Laynie

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September 1, 2013

The funny thing that happened was that, getting your very kind note, I sat back and tried to enumerate all the things that I should be celebrating, but I kept thinking of this one sore point (like he who can't stop himself from manipulating a loose tooth with his tongue) and that was my failure to secure a publisher for my third book of poetry!

And as I sat there admitting this failure to myself, or rather, absolving myself, the phone rang and it was news of a contest I had entered so long ago, I had forgotten about it, and they are telling me that I was the winner and my book is going to be published! So yes, I think sometimes magical things occur.

I'm gonna send the play to you here—I think you will like it—or at any rate admire Norma's great knowledge of the work of Stacy, Leslie, kari edwards, Barbara Guest, Rae Armantrout, she knows their writing so well it was child's play for her to come up with lines from their work to use as their dialogue! With love from, —Kevin K.

## PATRICK DURGIN

### LAST NIGHT

A Bar of One's Own is a monthly literary series held at The Stud, the only worker-owned cooperative queer bar in the country. The Stud was opened in 1966, three years before Stonewall, but it was imperiled by gentrification a couple of years ago. Then the venue was rescued. And last night, another rescue, or maybe it was a consecration. The Curatorial Research Bureau of the Yerba Buena Art Center in San Francisco had organized a performance of Kevin Killian's Poets Theater piece called *Box of Rain*, a camp farce noir hybrid thing wherein the very first fax machine (the prototype) faces off with Siri after a breakdown that inadvertently reveals this outmoded office appliance as a portal to the afterlife (which is kind of just hell). Real and imagined art stars report back to Earth and also inadvertently help solve the case of a stolen Picasso. They go on to solve the case of human mortality (why not, right?), all while managing to celebrate our subcultural islands by panning back on cosmic cycles that reveal archipelagos, constellations, mosaics. I'd seen *Box of Rain* at the Festival of Poets Theater in Chicago in 2016. I published it in his book *Stage Fright* the next year, and the book would finally get a launch party at Yerba Buena, until Kevin fell ill and the Curatorial Research Bureau responded by simply cancelling it. Maxe Crandall insisted it be staged and arranged for its production at A Bar of One's Own.

I only found out about this when Kevin phoned me up to explain his situation. Kevin sent a Christmas card every year since 2001 or so, but to call me up, well, that was out of the blue. He told me he was sick. Then he thanked me for publishing his work throughout the years. I heard



him cry for a second and realized he figured that we wouldn't meet face to face again, probably. Despite being optimistic and obviously feeling energetic after a tough few months of mysteriously debilitating sluggishness, this phone call was his goodbye. When it ended, I got in touch with Maxe and decided to fly out and surprise Kevin.

When I rounded the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and Harrison and found him standing outside the door to the Stud, convening his cast, I just felt so thankful to be there. Kevin is meta-networker; things pass through him. He connects other meta-networkers but also conveys information. Things, therefore, come to him. I came to him and just hugged him. He must have thought maybe I was some other, local bald guy in glasses; I have a very generic look. He said, "I can't believe you're here. You came all the way from..." pausing to avoid mistaking me? "...Chicago?" I wanted to surprise him, anyway.

He introduced me to Cliff Hengst and a bunch of other people. Cliff has starred in many of Kevin's over 40 plays written and performed by San Francisco Poets Theater. Tonight, Cliff played Siri. I am terrible at working a room, so I won't allegorize that trait by introducing you to anyone else I met last night, but I met a bunch of them and was otherwise my typical wallflowerish self. Last night a large crowd practically buried Poets Theater—which is itself a mode a sociality that sets into high relief the amity in "amateur"—in the walls of a landmark of American queer culture. Had Foucault been to The Stud on his joyously filthy stay in the Bay Area? And would that have been before or after "heterotopia"? Isn't that building at 9<sup>th</sup> and Harrison a sort of library?

What is Poets Theater can be gleaned from James Fleming. To promote the event, he listed its virtues on social media, "Clamoring coteries; life-

art imitations on scripts and stages and faces; abject cackling + beguiling glances; gossamer goss, cheap drinks, and even a book signing..." Imagine all of this simultaneously and then think about how that looks. We all carry scripts and they speak through us. No one says anything as if for the very first time. Those glances are as distracted from illusionism as is the role from the concrete individual; they hold tightly together that way.

*Box of Rain* ends when a couple of characters sing the refrain from Madonna's "La Isla Bonita." Unlike in Chicago, when the show went up in theater B of Links Hall, everyone at The Stud knew all of the words and sang along like it was Joan Baez on a cruiseline full of boomers. Everyone except for me; I don't know the words to that song. It was really the only moment someone either wasn't looking at a script or looking at someone else looking at their script. All blocking and spectatorship follow the scanning tempo of language. Finally, the whole cast piled onto the tiny stage with its sparkling orange and pink drapes. Kevin was having a hard time stepping up the stairs by then so he turned around to grab his cane and held the microphone standing on the dancefloor, the cast above and playwright below. Unable to join the rest of the cast for the curtain call, he said a few words from the dance floor. This was weirdly perfect; not sad at all. He simply thanked everyone for enduring this "play for 40 minutes." Laughter. That was, though, 40 minutes of our lives. He was not apologetic; the vicariousness of being an audience to "live" theater requires justification, because it saps time from life lived. Not this, though.

Ten years ago Kevin and I worked to make *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater: 1945-1985*. My role was mostly administrative, though I also edited some of his notes on the plays and even ghost-wrote two

or three of them. I remember trying to sound like him, which he didn't seem to mind. When I commissioned the book, I sent him a copy of Michael Benedikt's *Theatre Experiment* as inspiration. That was something of a miscue, though he would soon review it on Amazon:

Possibly the best anthology of American Poets Theater work ever done, Michael Benedikt's *THEATRE EXPERIMENT* has it all. Its focus is including an absolutely up to the moment panorama of the scripts that were interesting actors, audiences and directors at what seemed to be a crucial juncture for the American stage—the birth of off Broadway and off-off Broadway (1967). It was a time when Broadway itself seemed in danger of losing its hold on the populace due to escalating costs and a star system gone berserk (and a drying up of traditional sources of new material), but at the other end of the economic spectrum a whole world of experimental theater was making itself heard.

What became apparent as he and his co-editor David Brazil assembled a table of contents was how he thought of Poets Theater as something only “possibly” but not necessarily relative to the predicaments of the theatrical metropole. It lives in parlors, in little non-commercial galleries, in collectives and series like A Bar of One's Own. It may reference Shakespeare, Milton, or Stein. But Kevin's Poets Theater announces itself from the dancefloor-cum-library. It is life and life is a form of wiliness and volatility. His anthology ended with *The Birth of the Poet* (Kathy Acker's script).

Anthologizing can be solitary and anthologies mostly function dictatorially, but not so with Kevin. He always worked collaboratively on projects

like these. There are *Writers Who Love Too Much*, with Dodie Bellamy; *My Vocabulary Did This to Me*, with Peter Gizzi; and *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater 1945-1985*, with David Brazil. The “with” extends to the authors whose work is compiled and presented, not just to the editorial collaborator. Scott Burton once referred to theater as “schizophrenic” because there were so many interests and egos to manage. But Kevin had a way of siphoning off and away egotistical impulses, or, if they couldn’t be done away with completely, utilizing them toward the greater good—distilling them into virtuosity. This would be obvious if you’d ever seen or had a hand in his Poets Theater productions. On the page, you can glean this from his characters, ripped from sometimes moldy old headlines, transhistorically sharing space and setting off psychodynamics that are formally as experimental as the more clinical, syntactic brutality of Flarf, Language Poetry, or, say, Kenneth Koch’s plays in verse.

He also was reluctant to assemble his selected plays, *Stage Fright*, at least at first, because he thought that readers would see that they were really just the same play over and over. That’s what he said. I don’t think so; the book is a joy to read, but even if it were just variations on a theme or formally monologic, the script is not the same as the play. We have to have both to have one or the other, though. We agreed on that point. And now the book is launched, again from the dancefloor.

What now? The weather in San Francisco is perfect. I am leaving tonight to Chicago, where its volatility is more to my liking.

**NORMA COLE**

## Giving up the Private Property of the Self, or the Alienation Effect in Poets' Theater

For Kevin Killian

[Poets' Theater Panel at New Langton Arts, San Francisco, February 2, 2002]

"But I don't need the money a can opener franchise might net me. This face [touches her face], rumor'd to have been Sodom, has been my meal ticket for many moons. But now Fellini is here, in this house. I feel my doom drawing round me, close, like a particular, vacant picture by Robert Ryman, like these walls all white and pink, like puff pastry. Can you help me, Steve?"

This is Barbara Steele, from Kevin Killian's play, *Three on a Match*, from my script, with a hand-drawn slash and comma between "particular" and "vacant," the words "like these walls" written in by the author, a last-minute revision.

"Alienating an event or character," wrote Bertolt Brecht, "means first of all stripping the event of its self-evident, familiar, obvious quality and creating a sense of astonishment and curiosity about them."

In Poets' Theater as I have experienced it, the contradictory nature of cultural, social and political contexts, as well as subjectivity itself, is foregrounded. Ideas of causality, unity, sequence and categorization are turned inside out and stand revealed. Rules of convention and correct-

ness are material to be interrogated, as are theatrical norms and other expectations.

In scratch productions with few rehearsals, the making, construction, scaffolding, the raw materials of the theatrical event are asserted—by all the participants—the edges, margins neither frayed nor boundless but rather unbound. In this universe resolution does not reduce to totalization.

In the first place, the daily working lives of the participants in the production are asserted in the primary evidence: The Script. The Script is present, on the stage, in the hand, a ubiquitous character, a common denominator saying first of all, “This is writing, this is written.” There are of course exceptions, where actors learn lines, but for the most part, the script is onstage playing a dual role.

Poets’ Theater makes a commitment to the creative nature of lived experience in context. The context is not illusion. Not only that, as the individual skills and talents of participants become known, they are acknowledged and incorporated into productions—the productions expand to build themselves around these abilities. Potentialities are welcomed and thrive. Thus the work of Poets’ Theater is the least alienated labor imaginable.

This brings us to the aspect of ensemble work

“One might say that everything hangs on the ‘story’ which is what happens between people.” (Brecht)

The projects of Poets’ Theater are communal. They accrete and gather momentum, a kind of critical mass, building on local relationships in

time. Someone is writing—often the “someone” is a composite, a dyad, the multiple author—writing for known members of the future cast so the future is here and now. So even the primary or originary moment of writing is expansive, interactive, a function of the vitality of on-going conversations in a community. The boundaries of the community are permeable and shifting, since it consists of singularities, to use Agamben’s term. Individuals express interest in participating. This interest is incorporated. So the dynamics of the participants, a kind of multiple person, or mega-organism live in solution in continuous flux.

And the story inheres in the relationships. The individual participants “learn” each other and play to and with each other. This unfolding in any given play and over time through the sequences of plays becomes an objective exposition of social process, candid and revelatory.

This acting out of roles, our roles, drawing on everyday behavior, sequences, tableaux of everyday life recontextualized, presents a kind of social and cultural citation which is exposition. We quote our actions—and the actions of others—from memory rather than from empathy: “I am going through the motions of characters.” We try each other, play each other, the ensemble or cast going through the social motions, excerpting and recombining, thus exposing and questioning. It is collective art practice as well as an extension of the social.

Bodily presence, body language, including the script, holding and maneuvering with a script, moving while reading, not so simple, provides an unusual situation for the language of gesture, unrehearsed in these new combinations, naïve and awkward, willing vulnerability, a relief from the confines of default sophistication, a refreshing and stimulating defamiliarization.

We are onstage, and we are in the audience. In this playful juggling of theatrical conventions, the conventional separation of audience from stage is erased—or rather, from the outset, problematized, put into quotation marks, made more palpable through the suggestion of the possibility of erasure which is really the opposite of erasure or a now-you-see-it-now-you-don't function of performance.

One extension of this permeability inheres in how functions can change, reverse, merge at any time. That is, actor is writer, writer is director—any combination can ensue. The flexibility of situation accommodates all possible contributing impulses. The willingness of the multiple entity, the ensemble, supports all of the above.

The Poets' Theater Jubilee is an extraordinary example of this support. Poets who have not written plays are writing, have written them, people who have not previously directed plays are directing them. Some of the actors are the usual suspects, and some are newcomers to the experience. This would be the moment for us to acknowledge the impresarios of the festival, Kevin Killian and Camille Roy. And it would be the moment to acknowledge the individuals and organizations who run the arts spaces where the rehearsals and the performances take place. And of course this is a celebration for and by all the participants, including audiences, who make the Poets' Theater exist.

To return to the initial quote from *Three on a Match*—

That night we performed the play twice, back to back, to full houses crowded onto chairs and benches in Rick Jacobsen's KIKI gallery on 14<sup>th</sup> St. Between the performances, players and audience mingled on the sidewalk, joking and flirting, enjoying the evening. Rick Jacobsen has since died of AIDS, his gallery is gone, but we remember him and his



endeavors. For some of us he will always be associated with his support of Poets' Theater. This is one instance of the countless cooperative collaborative interarts events Poets' Theater has been part of.

The group work of Poets' Theater resonates for me in particular with the group translation projects I have been involved with. There is the same open opportunity to participate. The limits of the self become permeable, a composite entity, temporary, appears, then disappears, dissolves when the time of the project is at an end. It is an expansive, inclusive embrace. As Zukofsky said of poetry, it is "for the interested."

From personal experience, I can attest to the fact that the undertaking, once begun, becomes an adventure, a life-enhancing ...addiction! Once upon a time, many years ago, Kevin Killian surprised me by inviting me to take a tiny role in a play in which I would be Alberta, Elvis's maid. What is it to perform someone else's written words? As if the words are never not someone else's? I read the script over and over, defamiliarization! I practiced my lines, came to rehearsal, and then—the shock of addressing the other—relating!—there was a dynamic between the character I was playing, and the other, or others in the scene. There was tension. Dynamic tension! There were RELATIONSHIPS! The unpredictable ineffable had entered in a big way. It was revelatory. Since then I have never turned down the opportunity to take part.

And this is my personal moment to publicly thank Kevin for his special contribution, his on-going devotion to Poets' Theater.

—originally published in *To Be At Music: Essays & Talks*



## Kevin Killian

*Stage Fright: Plays from San Francisco's Poets Theater*

Kenning Editions, 2019

REVIEWED BY JO GIARDINI

Kevin Killian's poem "The Birth of Pallaksch"—the first in his final volume of poetry, *Tony Greene Era*—ends with a quote from Karl Jaspers: "Alone, I sink into gloomy isolation—only in community with others can I be revealed!—in the act of mutual discovery" (9). This foregrounding of communal truth building, an intertextual borrowing which closes a poem already replete with quotation, gossip and anecdote, points towards something essential in Killian's practice. Again and again, he worked with and through the work of others, turning to collaboration and commentary, on the page and in life. His books of stories are full of co-written pieces; he jointly edited important anthologies and magazines; he worked with Lew Ellingham, Peter Gizzi, and Carolyn Dunn, among others, to document central figures in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century poetics. Even his celebrated Amazon reviews reflect an interest in how the form of writing is shaped and deformed by public display and orientation towards an object. The community of reviewers and their criticisms form a context in which Killian's reviews function, and the playful uncertainty his reviews produce—did he buy the object in question? how truthful is the relationship between object and anecdote?—scramble the urge towards consumption and judgement. This scrambling is, often, the revelation of community for Killian. The mutual discovery Jaspers gestures towards becomes not clarity, but rather a messiness shaped by multiple perspectives, gossip, distorted memory. Pallaksch, the late Hölderlin's

neologism of uncertain meaning, “that perhaps and mishaps feeling, of yes [...] and no” (*Tony Greene Era* 4).

The joining of communal form and productive uncertainty is strongest in Killian’s decades-long work with Poets Theater, as practitioner, convener, archivist, and anthologist. In this medium, Killian could compose directly with an ensemble of community members (or compose a community for the occasion), and could layer the history of his actors and co-writers with that of the play’s subjects, producing a palimpsestic social web. As Killian writes, alongside David Brazil, in the introduction to *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theater*, “Poets Theater is first and foremost about the scene of its production. This is a social scene, but it is also, crucially, a geographical scene, and the two are complexly interwoven. The locales of Poets Theater are vortices, almost in the Poundian sense—self-interfering energy patterns like lightning rods, established to receive the influxes of new energy from whatever direction (young people, passers-through, wild cards, etc.)” (i). Because of this self-interference, this sensitivity to local circumstance and personality, the products of Poets Theater are incredibly variable, prone to revision based on the needs and desires of the participants, and open to chaotic hybrid genres that pastiche received forms. The disorderly plays reflect a gathering of people who are not easily reduced to stereotype or system, whose tendency is to excess. Killian and Brazil write that they “think of this theater as the instrument for self-reflection of the coterie” (xiii), and this could only mean that the coterie—so long as it doesn’t settle into an establishment—remains surprising, prone to producing forms of mutual discovery which complicate rather than simplify.

*Stage Fright: Plays from San Francisco Poets Theater* (Kenning, 2019), finally provides readers with an accessible selection of Killian’s theatrical

work. Previously, his playscripts had circulated mostly as fugitive chapbooks or among people who had acted in his productions, preventing an appraisal of the work as a body. The monumental *Kenning Anthology* modestly doesn't provide an example of the editor's own theater. Here, we have ten plays, approximately a quarter of Killian's oeuvre, written across three decades. They all crackle with a screwball wit, a desire to upend convention, and a utopian urge to revise history. They savour the twist ending, borrowed lovingly from genres like the soap opera, the noir, and the horror film. Hollywood stars, art world minutiae, poetry gossip, malfunctioning machines, shifts in fashion, song-and-dance numbers, tales of seduction, and debates on aesthetics form some of the backbone for the pieces, but each resists easy summary. Several plots overlap, historical settings are hazy with conscious anachronism, and fresh characters always threaten to arrive and destabilize the narrative.

*Stage Fright* displays a revivifying impulse with respect to the past, an archival yen which seeks both to shed new light on forgotten figures and to repurpose old technologies—coupled with a twisted repurposing of genre schematics and a love for the torqued plot and the reinvented backstory. Anais Nin is a recurring figure, mostly present to tell stories of her seductions to all present, but she also memorably poses as the inventor of Nintendo in *Island of Lost Souls*. In *Wet Paint*, a play about the creation of Jay DeFeo's monumental painting *The Rose*, Hall Mark—the invented inventor of the eponymously named Hallmark card—seeks to buy floral paintings for a new line of cards. *Box of Rain* centres around a prototype fax machine, invented by Rodney Faxenheimer, which enables communication with the dead and eventually upends all power relations structuring labor in the gallery setting. Each of these plays skewers heroic origin stories and the capitalist repurposing of human creativity<sup>1</sup>, centering instead the possibilities produced by the coinci-

dence of personalities, even in slapstick antagonism. The desire not just for a different future, but for a different past—one open to participatory dynamics and elaborate embellishment—is an animating force.

One of the keenest pleasures in the book is a chance to encounter the dearly missed author again, as character in his own work. Kevin Killian returns to us in diverse guises, laboring and playing, in youth and old age. He is, variously, a runaway boy and an overly-attached father, a spendthrift assistant at the Poetry Foundation, a secretarial aid at the Berkeley Art Museum & Pacific Film Archive. The mutability of Killian as role is present in three of the ten plays collected in this volume—*That*, *The Big Keep*, and *New Light on Riboflavin*—and in each he is newly shaped by circumstance, given to the audience through a new actor, revised by fresh conjunction of text and coterie. This is both a giving of himself to history and to the present, a utopian insertion into play with hallowed figures<sup>2</sup> and an openness to reinhabitation and interpretation by younger friends.<sup>3</sup>

In *That*, young Kevin Killian Jr. runs away from his namesake father and finds refuge with Paul and Jane Bowles, living in the San Francisco Sears building. He evades Killian Sr. while constructing stories of a criminal past and lapsing into prophetic and violent utterance. Eventually he is whisked away by a “vagabond poet,” as Harold Sears, the building’s owner, attempts to evict the bohemian and artist inhabitants. In *The Big Keep*, Killian helps run the Poetry Foundation in Chicago, and oversees a gross and spectacular mismanagement of the foundation’s funds in an effort to better publicize poetry—eventually recruiting St. John of the Cross, Lars Von Trier, and Lauren Bacall to help shore up the foundation’s mission, but only after selling off the majority of the archives and hiring artists to redesign the United States currency such

that it features Walter Benjamin, James Joyce, Jackson Mac Low, Janet Jackson, and George Oppen. In *New Light on Riboflavin*, Killian is a secretary at the Berkeley Museum, unhelpfully providing information of dubious veracity to visitors while the museum's curator, May Trix, attempts to clear away a car crash on the eve of an important Dan Flavin show. Anais Nin, Marshall McLuhan, and Gordon Lightfoot all disrupt the work, at different moments, sidelining Killian—who meanwhile has “a vision of an active, committed poets’ theater that would change the world.” (*Stage Fight* 351)

Andrew Durbin writes, in his introduction to *Fascination*, Killian's collected memoirs, that the texts do not “dwell on the provable connections between the living writer and his protagonist so much as they attempt, in their corrupt desire to ape and supplant reality with their own exigencies, to stand in place of private memory as a public document, as this book you hold in hand: the realer deal than whatever was once real” (13). So, too, the Killians of *Stage Fight* are posed as historically impossible figures generously made available to a wider world than the ‘real’ Killian's (already voluminous) social circle. The documents of the plays are truly public, encompassing alternate possibilities activated in conjunction with cast, audience, and reader. This is the double communal impulse of Killian's theatricism. He attempts to yoke together a present world of poets and artists in amateur collaboration, and simultaneously invokes impossible gatherings of past figures and presents them in a complexly choreographed arrangement that exceeds both history and geography. The play *Cut*, for example, uses the occasion of an academic conference on Hitchcock to gather the children of some of the director's stars: Princess Stephanie of Monaco, Melanie Griffith, Isabella Rossellini, and Jamie Lee Curtis. One can imagine the enthusiasm that Killian, an enthusiast of many Hollywood eras, would feel for this chance to

imagine these figures in conjunction, and this takes a heightened and manic turn as many are mistaken for important feminist film critics, such as Laura Mulvey, Jane Gallop, and Julia Kristeva. But Killian's fondness can also be seen in the note after the play script. He writes of casting for a performance in New York City, and discovering "to my horror that inadvertently I had arranged for a whole stage of people who in many cases hadn't spoken to each other in years." Persevering in the production, he eventually finds the show a "shining success," and is particularly heartened that "some of those who had come to the rehearsal as enemies mended their fences, at least for an evening" (*Stage Fright* 188).

David Buuck's short text, "Some Remarks on Poets Theatre," closes with a dream for the genre: "The best Poets Theater would be everyday life, with each person playing themselves. Total coterie, with everyone in on the jokes. In short, spontaneous life-art happening between the players." Killian's imagining of his production as a site for overcoming conflict extends this wish, that the theatrical experience will play with dynamics of community formation in a way that ultimately exceed the demarcations of aesthetic vs. political domains. This is a desire for something beyond healing, for a practice which builds and fights in the face of isolation and fracture. As Killian has it, in the interview with Heidi Bean which opens the volume, "as I realize more and more, I have worked in the theater to counteract the terror of AIDS, with its Agatha Christie-like shrinking of one's social world. I need to gather around me an army of like minded cultural workers, their bodies interposed between me and the void. Working communally has comforted me in this time of psychic and physical strength, yes, and strengthened me too. I don't think my own work is important any more. It's what we do as a people that matters" (*Stage Fright* 11). Remnants of their conditions of production, confounding and surprising, full of cattiness and a desire to evade the



cops, to exceed structures of expectation and oppression, the plays in *Stage Fright* belie Killian's own binary; his work matters because it is about what we do as a people.



*Rex Ray & Cliff Hengst in Geyser*

## WORKS CITED

<sup>1</sup> The play *The Lenticular* closes with the following exchange:

Greta: It is not one person who ruined our lives, but the whole nexus of market demands.

Dr. Tim (from offstage): By Jove, I think it's capitalism!" (*Stage Fright* 290)

<sup>2</sup> Killian is able to fantastically engage with characters including Alfred Chester, Barbara Hutton, Paul & Jane Bowles, Lauren Bacall, Lars Von Trier, Anais Nin, Dan Flavin, and Gordon Lightfoot.

<sup>3</sup> Cast lists for select productions, included after each play in the volume, have Kevin Killian played by Nathan Lever, Kota Ezawa, Rex Ray, and Theo Konrad Auer.