



Karen Finley, New York's first lady of performance art, takes on Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in her one-woman show, *The Jackie Look*, Saturdays at 7:30pm through April 24 at the Laurie Beechman Theater



MERRY WIVES OF THE WHITE HOUSE: Karen Finley discusses America's greatest First Ladies in her one-woman show, *The Jackie Look*.
Photo: Max Ruby

Interview by Scott Harrah

Karen Finley—whose one-woman show *The Jackie Look* runs Saturdays through April 24th—made headlines 20 years ago when she, along with Tim Miller, Holly Hughes and John Fleck, sued the National Endowment for the Arts for withdrawing grants on the grounds of indecency. Her main enemy was Republican Senator Jesse Helms. Finley took the case all the way to the Supreme Court.

Finley's early work was not for the squeamish. Finley's trademark was performing poetic rants about American culture, attacking homophobes, racists, and misogynists. Finley was as powerful as Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsburg were in their heyday, but the difference was she was a woman, and that threatened many. Although right-wingers reviled her, New York theater critics, young hipsters, and academics around the world adored her frank talk in spoken-word performances about sexuality, feminism, and gay and lesbian rights during an era when AIDS was decimating the arts world. As New York Times theater critic Ben Brantley once said, "Ms. Finley continues to deserve attention in ways that go beyond her status as the object of the wrath of Senator Jesse Helms."

Finley is the recipient of two Obies, two Bessies, and multiple grants from the NEA and NYSCA. She has toured internationally with pieces including *Make Love, George & Martha*, *The American Chestnut*, *A Certain Level of Denial*, and *The Return of the Chocolate Smearred Woman*.

Countless newspaper and magazine profiles have been written about her art. Her work is taught at universities worldwide, and she now teaches at New York University. Finley has left Manhattan for a quiet suburb, where she spends most of her time raising her teenage daughter. During StageZine.com's interview with Finley, she had to put us on hold several times because her daughter had the flu and Finley was double-checking with the doctor to make sure it was not H1N1. Finley has come a long way from her outrageous days of being a downtown Manhattan hipster to the devoted mother, world-renowned artist, teacher, and dedicated human-rights advocate she is today.

StageZine.com talked to Finley about everything from First Ladies and feminism to homophobia in America, and what she really thinks of Sarah Palin. In *The Jackie Look*, Karen Finley brings icon Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis back to life, with an innovative look at history, style, trauma, femininity, and the demands of being the First Lady. Using the structure of a lecture set in the present day, Jackie O—one of the most photographed women of her day—contemplates her life in pictures. Finley as Jackie also makes use of YouTube and views online homages to her and her family. Along the way, Finley's Jackie talks about Michelle Obama, Marilyn Monroe, Caroline Kennedy's run for Senate, Ted Kennedy, and the tragic day in Dallas back in 1963 when President Kennedy was assassinated.

Our interview with Finley was done on September 11, 2009, right before *The Jackie Look* was set to open at the Country Club. The show was originally developed as a site-specific

multimedia production for the Country Club, but last fall's run was canceled when the venue suddenly and unexpectedly closed. The show had to be rescheduled for the Laurie Beechman Theater, where it is now playing Saturdays at 7:30pm through April 24, 2010.

StageZine.com: What inspired you to do *The Jackie Look*?

Karen Finley: I think it was through a series of events. With the new administration, I was watching [on Election Day 2008] when Obama made his acceptance speech in Chicago in Grant Park. That site was where the Democratic convention was in 1968 with the violence. I had this moment of thinking my memory of this space, that everyone coming to that same park for his acceptance speech, so it was like the transformation of that space, and then there was so much projected onto Michelle and this kind of distortion between memory from the past, and the letting go of the past. So I decided-with Caroline Kennedy and then Teddy Kennedy and just so much feeling that there's this hope that the relationships between the Obamas and the new administration-I decided to have a talk based on if Jackie was giving a talk, a lecture. The first time I did this, I was invited to give a performance in Dallas. And so I thought gee, thinking about that was incredible. That would be incredible to have Jackie going to Dallas, like re-looking as part of her therapy, as if he she had to go back to that time and day but then also to let go of it. So that is how it started. Then it kind of expanded, so the premise is that Jackie is giving a talk in [2010] and looking at and asking the public to release her of their gaze of trauma. But there are humorous moments in the piece as well because the tragedy can almost become camp.

SZ: Why are people so fascinated by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis so many years after her death?

KF: That's what I explain in the performance. I think it's a combination of reasons, in terms of her glamour, of her being a monument of grief. I've been looking at images in terms of her experiencing the tragedy and we experiencing it with her, projecting onto her-and that being offered and I think that has a lot to do with it. I think there is a lot too of the Kennedys with the religion, the father, the family, the pressure. And I think it has to do with class and race too, even at that time, in terms of religion and power. Those issues still exist.

SZ: Let's talk about Michelle Obama and how she is portrayed in the media.

KF: Well, what I have in my performance is that Jackie went to church sleeveless, or she was sleeveless and she was considered too casual as well. I think it's also about feminism and the idea of how the woman is supposed to look, in terms of her modesty-that she is still supposed to be passive-subservient the way that she is to clothe herself, or cloak herself. It's fascinating considering in terms of our hyper vigilancy about the veil in the Middle East. It's fascinating that we're so concerned about Michelle's arms. In my performance what I talk about is that's really like a cover-up for not talking about Michelle's body and being a black woman. So I discuss that-it's in the performance as well. And I also talk about Caroline's utterances of saying "you know, you know, you know." Remember that's the reason why she was being accused of not

being up to the [job], not talking right-[not] talking like a Kennedy. People didn't like the way she talked.

SZ: Caroline Kennedy wanted to run for Senate and take Hillary Clinton's seat. Do you think that she was unfairly criticized? There were a lot of people against Caroline running.

KF: I think there were a lot of people for her, too, but I feel that there was [excessive] criticism about the way she spoke when she was saying, you know, you know. So I analyze that, looking [at] why she would be trying to communicate that utterance. And yeah, I think it's weird, but ultimately she did withdraw, and she's not looking to go into office anywhere else. I think we just have to interpret it for what it is. The whole situation with Teddy Kennedy, too, is tragic as well-that we're all viewing and we all know that he [was] going to die. And then it's even framed within the presidency because he's the one who gave Obama the push, and actually framed him next to his brother, and he's like the hope, he reminds him of his brother, and so it's all mixed in there.

SZ: I'm dying to know what you think about Sarah Palin?

KF: [Long pause.] I think Tiny Fey had it nailed [when she impersonated Palin on "Saturday Night Live"]. I think Palin just doesn't have the capacity [to lead the country]. The views, of course, I don't agree with, but there isn't the capacity, the knowledge, or the reflection to even base a conservative opinion on.

SZ: The Village Voice once said your art shows how women are defined by their sexuality and then demonized for it. Is this true when it comes to American's First Ladies?

KF: I think that with Hillary that certainly was there. I mean, a lot of the jokes that would go around, too, were very hostile. I think that's also true with Jackie with her husband-the philandering and Marilyn Monroe. That's also part of life, the idea of sexuality. Then, after her husband died, Jackie was going with Aristotle for her own needs, and a lot of people were against that. I loved that look she had in the 70s: Halston with the sunglasses. I don't think anyone with Laura Bush ever brought in her sexuality, do you think? I think that's another reason why with Jackie and with Michelle that you do feel that there is an attraction between both couples. You do feel that whatever it is, there's a lust or an attraction, desire-that human dimension of sexuality, and I think we felt that with the Kennedys and we feel that with the Obamas.

SZ: Let's switch gears and talk about the 1980s. You were a major part of New York's downtown scene in the 1980s. That scene is totally gone now, and I think there's a huge creative void. Do you think New York has become more conservative or that the times have simply changed?

KF: I think that people continue to be creative and neighborhoods and times always change. You know, there's the Jazz Era and different times during the 1960s. People say that about [San

Francisco's] Haight Ashbury—different neighborhoods and times change, with a certain historical moment in the East Village, and I was happy to be a part of it. But I think there were various reasons for that change that go beyond just an historical moment for that content of work, which was to be going outside of the commercial venue. I think we're part of the Baby Boom, and I think we're going to be assertive and insert ourselves within popular culture. And so it was a political act. I felt that even coming in and sort of taking over this [downtown] neighborhood. That was a political act: Taking it over and dominating it just by numbers.

You know, we were all younger, not in power. So that was significant. But I think the economy had a major impact in that, even when we came here, it was expensive but people would show work in like a little room. We weren't concerned about money in the same way. I would do my work in the 1980s and there would be like Limbo or these clubs or little places and in the beginning, sometimes I only had 14 people in the audience. And that wasn't considered bad. Sometimes there would be things at the Pyramid Club in the East Village and there wouldn't be a lot of people there but it would be considered something significant for just happening. And that I think is different now. New York was the largest city in the cultural capital. But when we were participating or creating work, that would be sufficient. Just that act itself was appreciated. I think that is part of the current cultural milieu right now. I was just on the train the other day going into the city to see Hair with my daughter and while we were on the train, we saw all these girls going to a baseball game. And the entire time, with everyone taking the picture, posing, so it's much different now. It's documenting the social network, and you're not necessarily in the present moment in the same way. And it's just different now. And then, space. I think things just got so expensive that no one could do things—it just became too cost-prohibitive. And the other thing I think is AIDS. I think AIDS depressed our community and it also decimated many of the population of many people.

SZ: Yeah, so many people from that era are gone now.

KF: See, what happened is, I didn't feel for a while. I think at that time, there's this one point that I felt bad. I just couldn't party in the same way. And I think it did affect my club work, or things like that just didn't have the same joy for me. There used to be these cabarets at Danceteria, and lots of different things going on. There was the Palladium. A lot of fun. And then [AIDS]. It was like a war that happened to our community.

SZ: Another obstacle in your career was the controversy with Senator Jesse Helms and your Supreme Court battle over National Endowment for the Arts funding. What was that time in your life like for you?

KF: I think it was really about homophobia because myself and three other artists that were gay and lesbian were denied grants on political grounds, and my work because it was feminist, but also because it promoted gay sex and sexuality. We then went to the Supreme Court to overturn the language actually and giving award grants. The government was allowed to deny support based on decency. And so that's what we went to the Supreme Court for. And it was difficult, but I felt that I had to participate in the system and use the U.S. system. I thought that we were

going to win, but what I realized is that sometimes you win by losing because it's a legal process. And now I think we have seen so much advancement for gay rights. I mean, not all of the rights are here, but certainly there's been a lot of advancement. Ellen DeGeneres is going to be on "American Idol," so 1990 that was 20 years ago. I [remember] that I had a performance where I had a wedding cake with two women on it-and I was like excommunicated from the Catholic Church. So I think there's been a lot of advancement [since 1990].

SZ: Now, you have a teenage daughter. How has being a mother influenced your art? Or has it?

KF: I think it has. She's been in my performances. She was in my show Make Love, which was about Liza Minnelli that I did, about 9/11. There's sometimes [problems] with time because my first priority is being a mom. So, going back to the lawsuit, I think that have been improvements since then. It was an adjustment because after losing the lawsuit, I didn't have access to many of the same places because of funding. So I had to be a lot more creative in places that I perform, and become much more diversified in what I do. I teach at NYU, too. I think something that wasn't around 20 years ago but is now is a high-school group called Gay Straight Alliance. That's fantastic. I do some work with my [daughter's] high school on that. That's something that I think is just really important.

SZ: Let's talk about the show you did on Liza. What fascinates you about Liza?

KF: You know, [since I was] in New York on September 11, 2001-it was kind of like a diary, a performance, about 9/11. And I couldn't use my persona, so I decided to use Liza Minnelli because I saw her on [a talk show] and I just felt that Liza's personality would be fitting to be the vessel for the performance. I performed, but I had other people be her as well, so I had many impersonators of Liza Minnelli and they performed on stage with me. It was also like drag Liza. But I think that's like Jackie Kennedy, too. It's just a drag hyper-ness about her: Her dress, her femininity. She's very costumed. So there's a performing of herself, and that I'm very attracted to. Hillary Clinton doesn't have that; Laura Bush doesn't have that. It's like when the self becomes outside of the self. I think that's what drag is about, too-having a consciousness about it.

***The Jackie Look* runs Saturdays through April 24, 2010, at 7:30pm. The Laurie Beechman Theater is located inside West Bank Cafe at 407 West 42nd Street at Ninth Avenue, accessible from the A,C,E,N,R,V,F,1,2,3 trains at 42nd Street. Tickets are \$20, plus \$15 food/drink minimum, available at 212-352-3101. www.SpinCycleNYC.com**

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