



Kemp, Lindsay (b. 1940?)

by Kieron Devlin

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Mime artist, renegade, and magnetic stage performer, Lindsay Kemp has long had a cult status in alternative theater. With its eclectic mix of elements--the *commedia dell' arte*, burlesque, music hall, ballet, the circus, improvisations, Japanese *Kabuki* and *Noh* theater, travesty, pantomime, and cabaret--his style is difficult to characterize.

In productions that are similar to musical revues--neither complete plays nor ballets, but something in between--Kemp and his company have astonished audiences with intense, erotically suggestive theatrical experiences that blur the line between high and low culture.

Once seen, Kemp's work is rarely forgotten. At its best, it achieves a wordless, resonant fusion of idiosyncratic physical, visual, and aural mime elements that vigorously assert the importance of his homosexuality to his performance ethic.

Stylistic Development

Kemp was born sometime around 1940 in South Shields in the North of England to a mother who encouraged his dramatic interests. His father died at sea when Kemp was three years old. While living in Bradford, he befriended young artist David Hockney.

Kemp applied for admission to the Royal Ballet, but was rejected. He later studied with Dame Marie Rambert and Marcel Marceau in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In 1968 Kemp formed a company of his own. His goal, he declared, was to be a Pied Piper, to lure, seduce, and intoxicate an audience with ravishing but emotionally intense gestures and sensations, to fool them into believing that the dream visions and gender illusions he attempts are real.

Kemp's first great success was a celebrated production of *Flowers*--a work that captured the essence of Jean Genet's novel and eventually had a triumphant run of six months at the Roundhouse, London in 1974.

Kemp then produced an all male reinterpretation of Wilde's *Salome* (1976) in which Kemp himself played the young protagonist and performed a seven-veil dance that resembled an ecstatic whirling dervish.

Also in the 1970s, he starred as the great Russian dancer in the title role of *Nijinsky*, a work choreographer Sir Frederick Ashton described as the most thrilling piece of theater he had ever witnessed. Such performances secured Kemp an adoring following, especially in Spain, Italy, and Japan.

Kemp was also invited to work with choreographer Christopher Bruce of the Ballet Rambert in a production called *Cruel Garden* (1977), based on the life of gay icon Federico García Lorca. He cast a bullfight scene as a dramatic struggle between freedom and the forces of restriction. This work achieved huge popularity and



Lindsay Kemp in 1979. We believe this image is in the public domain because its copyright has expired in Argentina. See Wikipedia for more information on this image.

was revived in 1998.

In these productions, Kemp mixed the beautiful and explicitly erotic with utterly grotesque elements of parody and satire. He pushed the boundaries not only of gender but of what was possible in the theater. In doing so, he emulated Antonin Artaud in attempting to achieve an improvised "total" theater that very often perplexed and repelled dance critics who found what they perceived as bathos and lack of discipline distasteful.

Kemp's uniquely mannered, phantasmagoric style has little use for words. His approach is to grab the senses at their most vulnerable, using stark colors and dissonant lighting contrasts. Fragments of poetry or dialogue occur, but the impact derives from gestures and vibrant tableaux. The effect is richly imaginative, layered, evocative, and, ultimately, enchanting.

Kemp's presence as leader and instigator of his own homogeneous and constantly changing company is crucial. He gathers around him loyal performers and musicians dedicated to promoting the Kemp universe. He encourages his actors to live their roles off stage. In Kemp's world, each mimed gesture emerges from within the body, based on a sure belief that the actor *is* a king, a harlot, Garbo, a fairy, a beast, Pavlova, a pimp, Isadora Duncan, or a Pierrot.

Derek Jarman's *Sebastiane*

Film director Derek Jarman used Kemp and his company for the delirious Roman orgy scene that begins his groundbreaking film *Sebastiane* (1976). Kemp appears in the scene nearly naked, splattered in glitter and sperm. According to Jarman, Kemp is "one of the key gay figures of the sixties and seventies."

Actors from Kemp's company, such as David Haughton and The Incredible Orlando, aka blind actor Jack Birkett, have worked closely with Kemp to enhance the company's style. Birkett also appears in other Jarman films, including *The Tempest* (1979) and *Caravaggio* (1989).

A Midsummer Night's Dream

In 1984 Kemp and Celestino Coronado joined forces to make a film of Kemp's idiosyncratic stage production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which had premiered at London's Sadlers Wells theater a year earlier. Kemp played Puck--a perfect role for him, part Eros, part clown, part satyr--who is seen hovering in the air above the crossed lovers.

Visually eccentric and memorable, this film exemplifies Kemp's ability to reinvent Shakespeare, unearthing the play's haunting, darkly erotic, subconscious allusions. Fittingly, Kemp even claims to be descended from William Kemp, Shakespeare's clown.

In the film, the changeling boy (François Testory) comes to the fore as a resonant image of the hermaphrodite, lusted after with relish by Oberon (Michael Matou). Thus, the crossed lovers in an enchanted wood are no longer heterosexual, but homosexual. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* may be Kemp's most fully realized work, though it dispensed with much of Shakespeare's text and established its own parameters.

Kemp as Gender Illusionist

In 1991 Kemp performed a rare solo work in a production called *The Onnagata* (Japanese gender illusionists). The title refers to Japanese artists who devote themselves to being perceived as female. Long an admirer of these gender illusionists, Kemp studied the elaborate language of gestures in Japan with Sasae Onesuke and devised a "fantasy in kimonos" in which he revisited many of his earlier roles.

Kemp's Influence

Kemp has had a major influence on popular culture even though he has never himself achieved wide fame. For example, Kemp made a decisive mark on David Bowie, who was Kemp's student in the late 1960s. They toured together in a small show called *Pierrot in Turquoise*.

The visual imagery of Bowie's experimental stage persona Ziggy Stardust was given a boost by Kemp, who directed Bowie in his Rainbow rock theater production in 1972. This show incorporated mime and dance in a way not attempted before in rock and roll, but it has since been widely imitated.

The young singer and composer Kate Bush also fell under Kemp's spell. The influence of his gestures and dance style are apparent in her stage and video work. Kemp appeared in her 1994 film *The Line, the Cross, the Curve*.

Elements of Kemp's influence can also be detected in the work of such disparate artists as the British drag theater troupe *Bloolips*, dancer Michael Clark, and even club and performance artist Leigh Bowery.

Contemporary Kemp

Kemp and Company's most recent show, *Dreamdances*, features Kemp and two of his long-time dancer-collaborators, Nuria Moreno and Marco Berriel. A kind of "greatest hits" reconfigured for a company of three, *Dreamdances* presents highlights from some of Kemp's most definitive works, including *Flowers*, *Salome*, *Nijinsky*, and *The Onnagata*.

Kemp now lives in Rome teaching mime and directing operas. He remains the most quintessentially outrageous and openly homosexual man of the theater.

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About the Author

Kieron Devlin studied Art & Design at Manchester Art School, England. He holds a Master's degree from Leicester University and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from New York City's New School. He is working on a novel and a collection of short stories.