

Isle of Lunacy

Speaking of stories, David Weinstein stepped outside his usual vein to tell one at Roulette April 12. *The Tale of the Poison Crop*, by Weinstein and Julie Nichols, was a theatrical work about a Pacific island whose inhabitants live on a multi-purpose vegetable called par-lot. Just as the tasty delicacy catches on in the outer world, enabling inhabitants of the archipelago to trade and enjoy the material benefits of civilization for the first time, the island crop develops a poisonous mold that drives the people who eat it insane. Forced to choose between madness and starvation, the islanders choose madness.

Michael Albo played the part of a nervous, self-justifying politician, hounded by a journalist (Charles Krezell), who kept repeating ominously "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world." Repetitive sampled music by Weinstein and Tim Spelios wove a dark atmosphere for an ambiguous but evocative allegory. —K.G.

Portrait of a Magus

Shelley Hirsch

April 26
Roulette

BY KYLE GANN

Jerry Hunt was 13 years old when he started his own mail-order religion. People began sending him checks for \$5 or \$10 in return for which he mailed out literature. Everything would have gone fine, except that a pair of devotees traced him to his home in the suburbs of Dallas and showed up asking to see the Master. Jerry's parents weren't amused and put a quick end to the missionary business.

Or so they thought. As it turned out, Hunt's life in music and video became a kind of religion, and his cult attracts devotees to this day. One of them is vocalist Shelley Hirsch, whose nervous, quicksilver improvising technique is an almost perfect match for Hunt's mystic brand of theater. Her homage-in-progress *For Jerry*, previewed at Roulette and scheduled to be unveiled in full June 12 at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, took as its basis several of the "sound drapes" Hunt recorded before he died in 1993. *Sound drapes* was Hunt's term for prerecorded back-grounds for improvisation of an unspecified nature, some of them with an insistent, quasi-Balinese steady beat, others limited in timbre yet randomly noisy, like wind chimes.

Hunt used to go through his antics with intense self-absorption; you could imagine him unaware that an audience was present. Hirsch matched his energy but was more lyrical and extroverted, more entertainer than priest. Her new thing is telling stories; amidst her babbling, squealing, and fake foreign languages, she told many about Hunt, including the one above, and she also tells her own stories on her new CD, *O Little Town of East New York* (Tzadik). The stories complement her work, making it more lucid, and she integrates them well. In midphrase she'd shriek into a falsetto cadenza, then plop back to finish the sentence. With the kind of tales she told (for instance, Hunt shouting encouragement to a flock of buzzards eating roadkill), the digressions seemed

right at home. She has a lushly gorgeous voice when she just sings, which she occasionally did, and a talent for mimicry, evident in a series of Texas accents. Imitating Hunt, she shook wands, rattles, and plant fronds at the audience as if exorcising from us the

As far as I know, no one quite understood what Hunt thought he was doing; he dabbled in his works with the angelic language of the 16th-century magus John Dee, based a structural geometry on small Texas towns, and was fascinated by statistical methods

analogous to the mechanisms of religious belief, in that they offered enough predictable correspondences to reassure believers but not enough to dispel skepticism. Yet a number of Downtown musicians have found his vision more believable than any of the better-known theologies, and his work, so undefinable in form, is being painstakingly preserved against all odds. (A video available from OO Discs, called *Four Video Translations*, captures Hunt at his mysteriously manic best.)

Hirsch's portrait—funny, virtuosic, irreverent, and caring—suggests a simple answer to the enigma: Hunt's art was simply indistinguishable from his bizarrely lovable personality. ♦



WIM V.D. HULST

Shelley Hirsch channels Jerry Hunt.

demons of our American capitalist normalcy. Meanwhile, video monitors ran shots of Hunt's home and drab stretches of Texas highway.

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