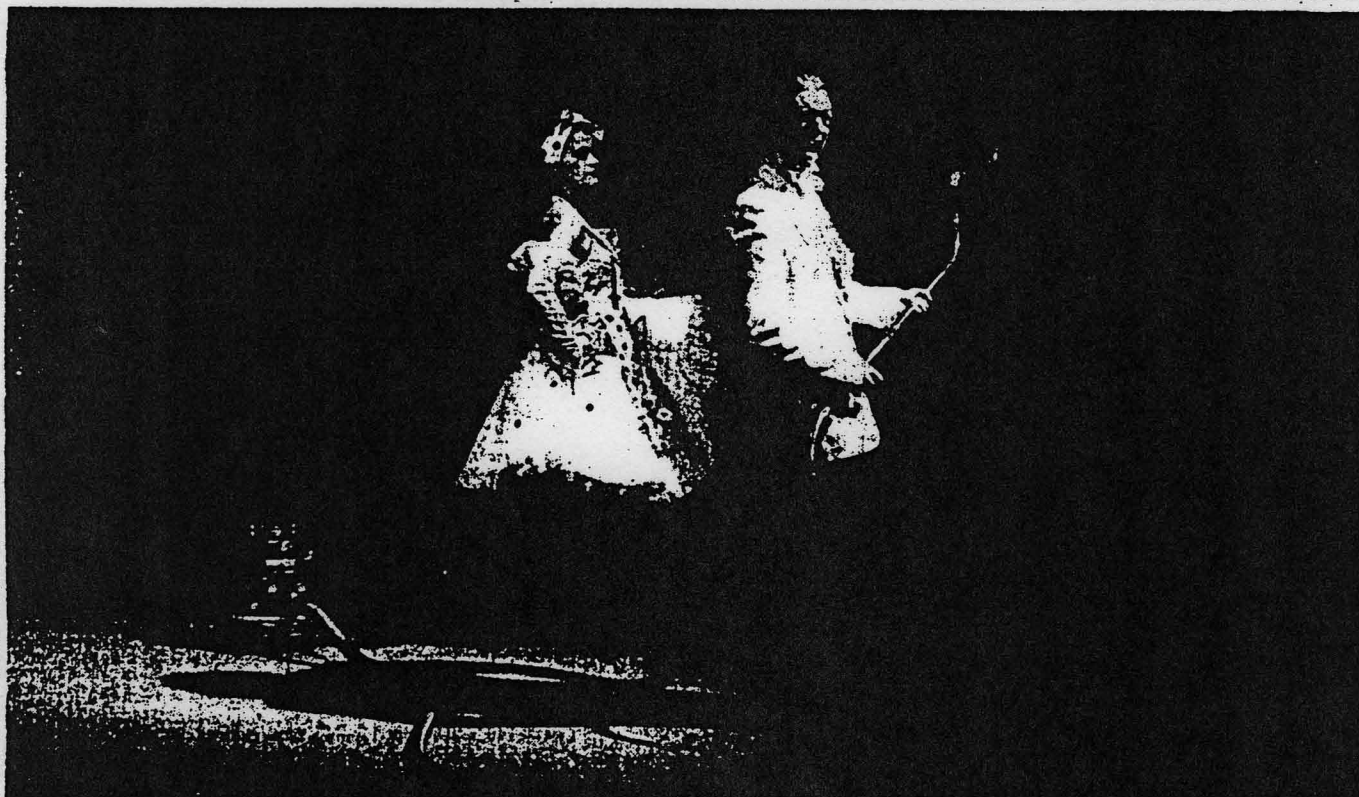


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LONDON'S ONLY DAILY INDEPENDENT GUIDE TO THE ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT



CLEANING UP ON THE PERFORMANCE ART CIRCUIT: Anne Wilson and Marty St James dance an unlikely tango with the vacuum cleaner. Who cares if the critics ask "What is it art?" when the punters clearly enjoy it.

THE FIRST encounter between Marty St James and Anne Wilson was in the best Mills and Boon tradition. It was love at first sight on the beach in Wales where Lawrence of Arabia was filmed. Soon they were running away together into the sunset, leaving all hindrances behind, from mothers-in-law to kitchen sinks.

Life together continues to roll out its romantic moments. When making their video, True Life Romance, on the Cornish coast they suddenly noticed people waving out to sea. The object of their attention was a small speck on the horizon which revealed itself to be the Royal Yacht Britannia. In one spontaneous swoop the couple turned their cameras round and recorded the moment when the Queen and Prince Philip disembarked.

As Marty and Anne say: "Reality is often more fantastic than fantasy itself." They have made the symbiosis between the real and the fantastic in our soap-oriented society the theme of their highly successful work.

Marty and Anne are performance artists. Instead of making objects to be sold, they become art themselves, enacting circumstances designed to stimulate their viewers. Other performance artists have been known to become bull-fighters and sculptures hanging off the wall. But, obsessed with the kitsch in our culture, Marty and Anne adopt the most kitsch personas they can think of, from a Come Dancing couple to Charles and Diana. Their aim is to question our assumptions, real and unreal, right and wrong.

They are part of an upsurge in

Sarah Jane Checkland talks to a couple of romantic performance artists who share a passion for kitsch

FANTASY LIFE IN HACKNEY

British performance art, generally regarded as the best in the world, and are participating in events during the next few weeks at both the Air Gallery, Rosebery Avenue, EC1, and the Riverside Studios, Hammersmith. Who cares whether the critics say "But is it art?" when the punters clearly enjoy it.

At home in Hackney this week Marty and Anne were relaxing in their ballroom costumes. She wore a multi-petticoat confection in daffodil yellow, with no number on her back but a delightful pinny tied to her front. He was dressed in an elegant bow tie and black tailcoat, and was in welcoming mood, beaming ingratiating smiles from behind empty spectacle frames.

But, in the streets outside, reality is threatening to disrupt their lives of cosy fantasy. The road where they live may have its resident Turkish zither player, its claim as the birthplace of Dick Turpin, and their own polka-dotted bathroom, but it is also threatened by the arrival of council bulldoz-

ers in May. "At Ellingfort Road, E8, the reality is actually pretty grim," Marty and Anne admit.

After trying petitions, and pleas at council meetings, they are using their art to fight the council. They claim that while the houses are run down, they are still adequate places to live and there is a chronic housing problem in the area; plans to build a factory are futile, they say, as the factories already in the vicinity have failed to find tenants.

The results of their protest can be seen at the Air Gallery from April 1. The walls will be lined with a monochrome mural of the street, complete with crumbling facades, abandoned shopping trolleys and collapsing sofas. In contrast, the centre of the gallery will become a verdant tropical paradise, with real palm trees, fountain and pool, and the sickly strains of "Take my hand, I'm a stranger in paradise" as Muzak; a symphony to the discrepancy between paradise and the truth.

Marty and Anne will also soon use their Hackney theme in a seven-minute art video for Channel 4, for which shooting starts on April 21.

Their paradise installation is part of a three-week season of performance work at the Air Gallery. Called At The Edge, it opens next Wednesday and has been organised by Rob le Frenais, editor of Performance Magazine since 1981. He describes the season as a "definitive selection of the newest and most experimental performance work in Britain and Europe". It will include the ripping up of floorboards to flash neon lights through the cracks, and a girl making deaf-and-dumb signs to a recording of Tammy Wynette's Almost Persuaded.

Performance art began 60 years ago as a nihilistic exercise by Dadaists like Tristan Tzara, who were sickened by the effects of the First World War.

It included yelling gobbledegook and scribbling whatever came into

their heads. By the Seventies, the fun had largely gone out of performance art. Thrilling at the prospect of an unsaleable art form which therefore defied the capitalist system and put the artist in direct contact with his audience, artists dabbled in things such as endurance work, which was literally how it sounds. American Laurie Anderson stopped the serious Seventies in their tracks with performances more like rock concerts.

Le Frenais says that, despite cuts at art schools, there has been a boom in performance art for two years, and he regards it as a test bed for all forms of art and design. "You always know that some bright spark in pop video will steal the idea."

Despite its lighter side, performance art has a serious edge. Marty St James and Anne Wilson are a good example. "It's such an odd experience being British, so we try and exploit it in our work," says Marty.

"In a practical sense it's the economics of having no money from the Arts Council: in terms of content it's to do with class, sex, the education system, the Royal Family, capitalism versus socialism: the attitude that 'whatever's happening, it's not happening to me'."

During a recent tour of Canada, they told their work "echoed a world which was dying, but had the capacity to start over again". What a perfect blend of ingredients, they think, to reflect our time: optimism and pessimism in equal measure.