

of her ancestors from the Isle of Harris by the British army in the 1840s and '50s and their subsequent emigration to the Isle of Skye (or, in some cases, Cape Breton.) Quietly, Morrison, in a heavy Scottish accent, tells the story of the dispossessed families. "It is I think better forgotten if one can do it," she says. But clearly, that has not been possible. The painfulness of the event has caused the story to be passed from generation to generation. That emotion, although distanced, can be felt in Keane's film. Facts are sketched out but the story is nevertheless vivid.

Through the years and the oral retelling it begins to acquire a structural character of a myth in development, an explanation of a difficult-to-explain occurrence in tribal (Scottish) spiritual as well as political history. The hypnotic image that Keane has chosen to illustrate that event reinforces that transcendence. All she gives us to watch is the shadows of a few figures moving on shipboard, reflected on rushing water. As Morrison talks about the burning of Harris by the militia the water suddenly turns bright pink, then fades to blue-green as she continues her account.

## Cultural fragmentation

What is particularly striking about *Shadows* . . . is the subtlety with which Keane conveys the facts and reverberations of the eviction but uses neither a documentary nor a truly narrative form in doing so. Keane successfully walks a line between objectification and catharsis, a narrow functional path to survival. What was particularly useful about the inclusion of *Shadows* . . . was the obvious but necessary observation of the historical fallacy of Britain as the "United" Kingdom. It provided a non-artist witness to that fact, a personal account of the effects of cultural fragmentation within the Anglo-Saxon nation.

Like *Shadows of A Journey*, Linda Montano's videotape *Mitchell's Death* uses a fixed camera on a single image to create the deeply moving account of a fragment of her personal history. In the evenly modulated rhythms of a litany, she details the sudden death of her ex-husband, Mitchell Payne from the moment she hears of it, to visiting his body in the mortuary. The image of a talking skull slowly transforms into the downcast face of Montano wired with acupuncture needles then fades again to the brittle outline of a skull. As in her performance, *A Nun's Fairy Tale*, a primary reference is made to Catholicism. In this case, the dramatic pacing of ritualized prayer mediates her passage through disbelief, grief, and the beginnings of acclimation to his death. The familiarity of the ritual structure counterbalances, just as the reality of his death momentarily transcends, the actual details of their relationship. Montano's mourning becomes archetypal; spirituality surfaces as functional, curative and universal.

In *Learning To Talk*, Montano steps back and becomes an actress, a prime-time pro straight from L.A. In five scenes she

dresses up and acts out the roles of women hustling through the media — a French poetess selling her latest book on life and love; a half-blind, white woman jazz singer in a black man's world; a country and western singer with a few pointers to fame and fortune (that, in her case include hard-driving men, nature and the Holy Bible) — available, of course, for a small fee; a nun diagramming the worlds of mortal and venial sin; a practitioner of quasi-medical theory in the throes of shamanistic euphoria.

Montano's characterizations are hilarious. They quickly unite, however, around a few very unfunny issues. An unspoken critique of the ways in which women are trivialized through the media begins to be articulated as the cumulative and residual product of women talking about who they are in inauthentic voices — voices that have become media cliches. Montano uses the misogynist bases of television humor as a satirical device that allows the viewer to empathize with the women she has chosen to portray. Suddenly, these five women, who by their



In Rose English's "Adventure or Revenge", characters under hard feminist scrutiny.

very access to the air waves are special (*i.e.*, male establishment sanctioned) are victims of the hustle perpetrated on all women. That common ground is mapped out, not only by *Learning to Talk's* politic and media reference, but by the fact that Montano, in playing all five roles, implies a sixth character undergoing a process of identification with each.

## Theatrical video

If any medium could epitomize the jaded glory of L.A. cultural life it would be television. For London, the theater tradition has come to occupy a similar position. Just as the glow of the video monitor and all it signifies was the point of departure for *Learning To Talk*, the institution of the British Music Hall was the springboard for Rose English's performance, *Adventure or Revenge*.

In dismantling the theatrical conventions of the Music Hall with all the skill of a double agent, English inadvertently exposed the formal devices

of her L.A. counterpart's comedic style. Among other things, the framework of her performance took the form of an eccentric improvised lecture on technique, baring the underpinnings of theatrical illusion — the tricks of the trade according to the *Actor's Handbook*. From a harshly-lit platform, dressed in a conglomeration of Elizabethan-ish men's garb, a bearded English expounded on how to do it well when one is on the road — or making the most of travel and adventure. Along her route she also managed more than a few well aimed shots at England, the art world and men. At the outset the personae she has assumed is under suspicion. As the pompous patriarch/veteran actor/man of the world she frequently refers to herself as a "non-sexist man." At one point she wonders aloud, "As a man, I am interested to know why women feel they have to dress in drag." Little by little, she abandons her drag image, rummages through a prop box, settling now and then on an item, demonstrating nonchalantly its many possible but unlikely uses on the stage — horsetail as phallus, diaphragm as hat, beard as bracelet or victim of her knifing, her revenge. Through all of this English's humor remained mad and unexpected, the detours in her discourse heterogeneous, and her awareness of her audience unerring.

Like Montano in *Learning To Talk*, English's relationship to character portrayal was fundamentally at odds with that of the ordinary actor. Her presence as the creator of persona was never subsumed by the persona she had created. Character remained invention and the uses and sources of that invention were, in fact, under hard feminist scrutiny. Her ironic reversal of the misogynist currents in traditional drag served to under-score a subversive, dialectical discourse on gender and public/personal image/action. When English abruptly disappeared from her, by that point, all but ransacked stage, an incredibly clever theatrical machine had brought into being a vision of the world quite unlike anything else to be found in the L.A./London Lab. A performance marked by false starts, strangely paced changes in focus, odd mixtures and manipulations of emotion and intellect, protean shifts in character, voice and sex left behind a dumbstruck audience thrown to the edge of some complex insight.

At the end of the L.A./London Lab itself I was also dumbstruck — but not by the proximity of revelation. Three weeks of periodic immersion in a pool of egos, hopes, assumptions, conflicting viewpoints, divergent esthetics, politics and cultures left me anxious for air and perspective. In the preceding pages I have isolated some of the works that, looking back, managed to surface not only as components of the quagmire, or as significant elements unto themselves, but as points of reference in coming to terms with the fecundity of the terrain. □

Tony Whitfield is a writer and editorial contributor to FUSE.