

The New York Times

When the Street Is Home, Lives Are in the Public Domain

THE SETTING

Two men dressed in black rattled loose change in Greek-diner-style coffee cups, repeating the refrains of sidewalk solicitors, like "Spare change, please" and "Show your love for the homeless." Most of the 100 onlookers seemed sympathetic to the pleas. Still, no spare change came forth. The people in the crowd had, after all, just paid \$12 each for the show at the Kitchen, a performance space at 512 West 19th Street. The show, "Portraits," was an audiovisual work created by Kevin James, a composer and former social service counselor. Mr. James's music, performed live by an array of soloists and ensembles, was mixed with a soundtrack containing fragments of interviews he had taped with hundreds of homeless people. There were also street sounds, like car horns and police radios.

The coffee cup shakers were actually professional percussionists using the makeshift maracas to create rhythms. While two overhead screens showed pictures of street shelters and fast-speed clips of commuters, a neatly dressed, clean-shaven actor recited a monologue written by a homeless poet. Violinists in black turtlenecks played plaintively to a soundtrack of hard-luck stories, including one man's descent from doorman to depression and another who declared himself as useful as "a one-legged Rockette."

THE BUZZ

After the show, Simi Ranman, 25, a pediatrician from the Pelham Parkway section of the Bronx, described the performance as "kind of like mind yoga. It stretched your mind out," she said. Her roommate, Manic Gunatilleke, 26, a researcher for an Internet start-up company, said she could sympathize with the homeless, having "couch-surfed at friends' places while I was in between apartments." Still, she said, she often found herself feeling impatient with panhandlers.

"Normally, I'm like, 'Get away,'" she said. "But this really made me think." _At a discussion between the audience and Mr. James and the musicians after the show, one woman wearing a suit and pearls said the show put her in a quandary of conscience about helping the homeless. "It makes you wonder" she said. "Do you just walk away from it or do you do something about it?" Mr. James, 38, nodded The first night he stayed in New York a home less man died on his stoop, he said. And his interviews took him some dangerous situations, including the time some crack dealers mistook him for a police officer. "What?" said his wife, Renee, standing off to the side. "You never told me this!" Sue Bernstein, a manager for entertainers, asked the musicians what they were feeling while playing along with an often loud and dissonant soundtrack. The musicians cast sideways glances at one another. Then Ronald Lawrence, the violist in the Sirius String Quartet, which played along with subway train clatter, took the microphone.

"Terror," he said.

COREY KILGANNON

Sunday 3/12/00