

**Marcia
Farquhar's**

**ACTS
OF
CLOTHING**

We're born naked and the rest is drag. RuPaul

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Marcia Farquhar's *Acts of Clothing* related more to an American model of performance than anything we'd see in London. The degree to which she was comfortable with her public and her disregard for the partition between performer and audience reminded me of Eric Bogosian and certainly Flanagan. Unmistakably indigenous though was the acute language with which she delineated nuances of experience that for most of us would remain indescribable.

The set-up was economical: a fashion runway on which Farquhar modelled some 30 outfits from the last 20 years of her life, using them to recall key events. Beginning with a parodic inversion of nationalist appropriations of costume, she danced a hybrid flamenco-fling in a gypsy outfit (of Farquhar tartan) to see if either of her Spanish/Scottish heritages might include a talent for dance. Clearly not, but it nicely introduced her main project of revealing the signifiers generated by a life's clothing. As each article was taken from the rail alongside, was discussed, squeezed into, and then discarded onto the growing pile at her feet, we were drawn into a complex reflection on autobiography.

I feel wearied and patronised by the autobiographic literalness of artists insisting on the virtue of all that happens to them. Here for a change, due to Farquhar's exquisite command of storytelling, I was trusted to weave my own image of the performer's life from the fragmentary narratives. Revealing a deep history she delineated old

prejudices, styles of speech, obscure patterns of thought, once used by people who had drifted out of her life or died. This gave an unexpected social dimension to the feminist critique underlying her project. Performatively, Farquhar's piece was a lucid enactment of the processes by which women's clothing can express desires and thereby concede the means of repressing those desires – as with the modest suit worn to appease her father-in-law one lunchtime in New York, to which restraint he added the imposition that she refrain from drinking. This was an extraordinary performance, the more exceptional for its agile language, where Farquhar, with the timing of a stand-up comic, could turn her often hilarious anecdotes into unexpected revelations of vulnerability.

Mark Harris



South London Gallery, 1999