



Jane Comfort

By [Deborah Jowitt](#)

Wednesday, October 1st 2008

Listening to evaluations about the current candidates for the highest office in the United States is downright alarming. So often the focus is on style—how forcefully they punch a point home, how confident they look and sound. Does he remind you of your favorite uncle? Is she just like you (only with designer eyeglasses)? Performance has become an important factor in determining who's "presidential" and who's not.

So it only seems odd at first that Jane Comfort, a choreographer who's tackled political issues with passion and mordant wit, would decide to mingle an unflinching look at torture with parodies of reality shows like *America's Next Top Model* and *American Idol*. The title of her new work, *An American Rendition*, itself packs an ironic punch: *rendition* as in "What are you going to sing for us tonight?" and *rendition* as in the undercover transporting of suspected terrorists to countries that condone torture.

Comfort's message not so obliquely condemns citizens who can discuss TV contestants more knowledgeably than they can political issues. It's interesting to note, too, that humiliation plays an important part in those shows, as it does in torture, although, of course, a dressing-down on your awful taste by Michael Kors doesn't rank high on the embarrassment scale when compared to the treatment of prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Those eliminated from *Project Runway* thank the judges and hug the winners. In *An American Rendition*, Leslie Cuyjet slides her bra and underpants out from under her clothes, hooks the bra on Sean Donovan, pulls the panties over his head, and smiles for her photo op. (Donovan plays an innocent American citizen who was in the wrong place at the wrong time and who happens to have dark hair and a beard.) The remote control can't switch off scenes like this; they re-run endlessly in our heads.

Aided by her splendid colleagues Joan La Barbara (music), Steve Miller (visual design), David Ferry (lighting), Jung-eun Kim (video projection design), and Liz Prince (costumes), Comfort stitches her disparate materials together with almost faultless theatrical skill. The surreal bureaucratic maneuvering evokes the ordeals of Franz Kafka's hero, K. The performers lined up to board an airplane are subject to the whims of a security guard (Olase Freeman), whose instructions get weirder and weirder; the clothes in the plastic bags the passengers carry then become their hastily assembled costumes for a fashion competition. The woman dressed as a housewife (Jessica Anthony) wins and then becomes the wife trying to fill out a missing person report on her husband, while officious officials build virtual mazes. By the time Lisa Niedermeyer and Ellen Smith reappear dressed in gray suits, they're rebuffing Anthony in song and dance, chorusing an impossibly long phone number she can dial to get more information.

Talents shows erupt while combatants are wrestling on the floor. Donovan is dragged to a chair, tied up, and hooded, while in the foreground, Smith excoriates Peter Sciscioli for singing "I Feel Good," made famous by James Brown; how dare he—he's white! And, she adds scornfully, "Are

you Presbyterian?” A mic is held to the writhing detainee’s mouth, and he sings a love song, bows, and is then carried back to the interrogation area. In this scenario, the detainee is repeatedly asked to identify a man in a photo. He’s never seen him before. Oh really? They were both at the same scientific conference. But over a thousand people attended that conference! That’s not the right answer. Hooded “dogs” snarl around him. Kim’s initial projections show the insides of bags passing through an airport scanner; when Donovan is being dragged violently around by the ankle, we see images of a shattered bone. While the shows go on, and his wife keeps confronting the officials who are withholding information, the assaults on this man’s dignity and the pain that’s inflicted on him gradually weaken his resolve, cripple his body, and reduce him to a kind of animal state (Donovan is outstanding at showing this).

In the end, the innocent prisoner is freed without explanation and hobbles away in suddenly red lighting, while Sciscioli, who has often played the interrogator, dozes in his chair, remote in hand.

The program quotes Dick Cheney’s speech on *Meet the Press*, September 16, 2001, about having to work “sort of on the dark side” to combat terrorism, ending with “And, uh, so it’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal basically, to achieve our objectives.” In *An American Rendition*, Comfort rips Cheney’s patchy blindfold, “sort of,” off our consciences, and tries to swing our gaze away from that beautiful dictator of American dreams, Heidi Klum.