

Howl is a tour de force

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American poet Allen Ginsberg invented the Beat Generation in 1955 when he published his long, rambling but acutely imagined poem Howl.

“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving, hysterical, mystical, naked ...” it begins.

The poem is snapshot of a youthful, restless, postwar mindset that refused to suffer in silence.

Janice Jackson, who calls herself “the shock soprano,” commissioned three contemporary Canadian composers to each write a one-act mini-opera using Howl as inspiration. Sandy Moore contributed The Howl Project, Klaus Ib Jorgensen, Howl — The Opera, and Marie Pelletier Howl Amore/Han No. 7.

Friday night in the Dalhousie Art Gallery, Jackson performed each of the operas, each in a different gallery.

Tour de force? Original?

Unquestionably.

Though not really shocking anymore. Just old-fashioned performance art.

Not that Jackson set out to shock. She dug deep into the 1950s and mined its neuroses, missing entirely, unfortunate, its painfully earnest innocence.

In a brief break between each opera, Jackson retired to her dressing room to change costumes while the audience shifted galleries. Only 20 spaces made the performance manageable with minimum fuss. It lasted just under two hours.

Jackson is a master of extended vocal techniques. Her voice is clear, true, pure when it needs to be, edginess on call, comprehensive, including shouts, squeals, growls and grating timbres on instant standby.

In Moore’s The Howl Project, Jackson appeared as a shaman in a ragged cloak, accompanying herself with shell rattles and vocalizing in yips, cries and yells.

In Ib Jorgensen’s Howl — The Opera, she wore a short ballet skirt and sat opposite a vintage radio with a sculptured plastic case and quoted snippets of Duke Ellington and Henry Mancini among other vocalisms.

In Howl Amore/Han No. 7, she sang from inside a sort of cabana, on whose central pole hung a variety of rattles she shook from time to time during her abstract performance.

Her performance, as her performances often are, was a tour-de-force.