

San Francisco Mime Troupe turns 50

- June 25, 2009
- Contra Costa Times; June 25, 2009

- *By Pat Craig*
Staff Writer

It was a different time in 1959, really different — Ike was in the White House, the Barbie doll had just been introduced and the really cool kids on campus were well groomed in Ivy League togs and listening to folk tunes.

At the same time, the R.G. Davis Mime Troupe was evolving from traditional mime and dance into a sort of avant grade theater company combining mime, commedia dell'arte and a healthy dollop of politics and shock. The result set the foundation for what became the San Francisco Mime Troupe and was perhaps a preview of the '60s in San Francisco.

The company, still a collective, still ultraliberal and still kicking one target or another, celebrates its 50th year Saturday (on its traditional July 4 opening) with its latest show, "Too Big To Fail," which it describes as a "tale of greed and sacrifice, high finance, love, goats, and the terrible curse that tore our little village apart "... Credit!"

Wilma Bonet, a veteran Bay Area actress and member of the mime troupe, is directing this year's production.

"Yes, it is quite unusual and quite an honor with all this tradition," she says of the milestone anniversary. "Really, though, I haven't had that much of a chance to think about it. We've been so busy just putting together the show."

In its early years, the company performed late nights in the SF Actors' Workshop's Encore Theater, with shows that occasionally would lapse into nudity (before the Broadway topless boom) and language similar to that which got Lenny Bruce busted in the late '50s and early '60s.

All of that evolved into the troupe's familiar outdoor shows, which in the beginning often were broken up by police, mostly for violating park regulations and for obscenity — something that seems quaint compared to the outdoor excesses of the Summer of Love and the guerrilla theater movement that flourished throughout the Bay Area in the mid- and late-'60s.

Divisions arise

R.G. Davis is still a member of the troupe's board, but is not actively involved with productions. He broke with the company some years ago over a series of disagreements, including over the move to replace the troupe's commedia dell'arte, a centuries-old, highly stylized form of Italian comedy usually performed in masks, with something more akin to musical comedy.

"I don't do musical comedy," he said flatly in a telephone conversation. "Musical comedy/theater is melodrama used by the SFMT, Hollywood and Broadway."

- Another hotly debated issue in the troupe is whether to aim its comic barbs mainly at lampoonable government personalities ("This works when the Republicans are in power but not so when the Democrats are in office," notes Davis) or delve into the issues — rather than personalities — behind social problems.

In a theater troupe that is both politically charged and geared to activism, disagreement and descent are part of the package, but through it all, the group has managed to remain vital and together for 50 years.

Internally, the group has been in an ongoing dialogue about mission and methodology, but the company has managed to show a unified external front and produce at least one show a year for the past half-century, which makes it one of the oldest theater companies in the Bay Area.

Joan Holden, whose ex-husband, Arthur, was a member of the troupe from nearly the beginning, has observed much of the company history, "as sort of a mime troupe groupie."

"I remember the first time I saw the troupe was at the Encore (Theatre) on Mason, where the Actors' Workshop was," says Holden, who has written 30 scripts for the company since the mid-'60s. "This would have been 1960 or '61, and I saw them doing commedia dell'arte and I had never seen that much energy on stage. I'd never seen people move like that. I fell in love with the company right there."

New issues

Holden found herself at loggerheads with Davis over the commedia/melodrama question in the late '60s and '70s. She and others viewed melodrama as something of an American version of commedia, more accessible to audiences and a more flexible form to present stories. And it seemed to resonate with the audience.

"Melodrama turned out to have this undreamed-of power," she said. Holden says she and many mime troupe members found the form much more flexible and adaptable to addressing the issues at hand, particularly to an American audience more familiar with the form of melodrama than with commedia and its stylized costumes, conventions and stock characters.

Right around this time, she added, the troupe found itself "mobbed by the women's movement," and discovered feminist issues also needed a voice in the troupe's productions. "The passions of the play were usually incendiary and we would see radical lesbians start necking in the back of the crowd with their shirts off. We got giant crowds and found we had tapped into something huge and very powerful, speaking the zeitgeist."

Throughout the '60s and '70s, particularly in the Vietnam War era, The Mime Troupe toured extensively and was a particularly hot ticket on college campuses, where veteran performer Dan Chumley became acquainted with the group. He wound up joining it from 1967 to 2003.

"I was at Harvard University and they came in the middle of the whole Vietnam War thing. And I became a technician because one guy quit, so I dropped out and traveled with them; it seemed reasonable at the time," says Chumley. "The hardest part was telling my dad I was dropping out of Harvard to travel with the mime troupe, but it was just as good of an education."

The experience taught him "an important new way of looking at life."

Over the years, the company has retained some longtime members, then picked up kindred spirits along the way, either on the road or in San Francisco.

Ed Holmes, who enlisted in the Navy in Cleveland and enrolled in Cal State Hayward when he was discharged in 1973, fell in love with the mime troupe the first time he saw it, but he didn't join until 1986 after stints in the Berkeley Mime Troupe, Antenna Theatre, commercials and TV work, a long stretch with Fratelli Bologna, the San Francisco-based sketch comedy group, and a stint in Los Angeles for the obligatory stab at movies.

Unique circumstances

Holmes figures at least part of the troupe's success can be attributed to the Bay Area weather.

"Both the physical and mental weather," he says. "We've always performed in outdoor venues and we've never been rained out. You couldn't do that in Seattle or Portland; it's too hot in LA. And the mental weather, that's the magic of the Bay Area — progressive with an experimental attitude of, 'Why don't we give it a try?'"

For the past eight years, Holmes has taken advantage of his physical appearance to play former Vice President Dick Cheney, whom he played not only in Mime Troupe shows, but in a run of "Dick and Dubya," a successful comedy with Bill Allen from Duck's Breath Mystery Theatre, and a separate production called "The Biggest Dick in America."

But the Mime Troupe is what he enjoys and he's pleased to be returning in this year's anniversary show.

"It does feel good to be back for it; kind of a historical honor," he says. "It's really a grand style of theater."

- © Copyright California State University, East Bay.