

Modest proposal for improv theater troupe

BY ED BOWERS

THE idea for this project was inspired by director John Cassavetes' first movie, "Shadows," made in the late '50s. I was impressed by its beautiful cinematography as well as the dialogue, which had an organic quality to it, a lack of pretension. It allowed the viewer to suspend disbelief and become absorbed in the characters and their situations and points of view. At the movie I watched for the scriptwriter's name so I could catch more of his work.

To my shock, a notice came across the screen stating that most of the dialogue was improvised by the actors. Truly impressive.

The actors were not playing themselves; this was not a documentary or a reality TV show, but a theatrical presentation. Much as a jazz band might honor the emotional essence and melody and harmonics of a love song, yet through improvisation add a precious aspect of their consciousness to it, the actors in "Shadows" had interrelated and spontaneously played off one another to get to the essence of their characters. Their medium was words.

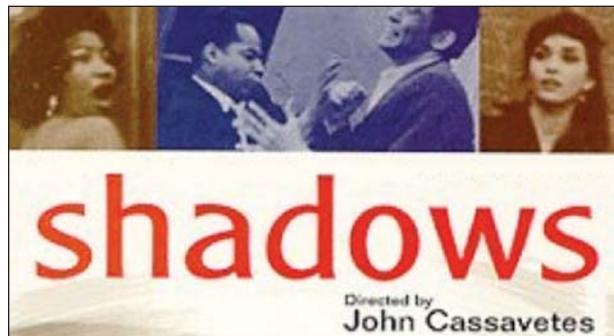
I began to wonder why improvisational theater isn't widespread, especially in a city like San Francisco, with a reputation for attracting writers, poets and painters who transcended conventional limitations of form and content and took chances, experimented and came up with an original expressive medium. I was perplexed that improvisational theater had not already been done to death.

The purpose of art, like science, is to allow people to see in a way that they never saw before. Once the world was flat, now it is round. Once a Picasso painting would have been laughed out of the gallery, now it is worth millions of dollars. Taking chances, experimenting, failing and succeeding are keys to this artistic process, and I believe that all these means to creating a work of beauty and insight are contained in the process initiated by improvisational theater.

The Faithful Fools, which is hosting an improv event this month, is a perfect venue for improvisational theater because of the large variety of people participating in its programs. People of all ages and races and cultures come to The Fools, and I bet quite a few would be interested in a creative project where they could be full participants in its creation.

Improvisational acting, which compels the actor to look deeply inside to sense the point of view of the character he or she is playing, is a powerful means of self-discovery and a shortcut to empathy.

An actor who mimics character and parrots an author's words has talent and is not to be disrespected. But an actor who must explore the self to understand the character of someone else, and speak for that character through his own words is experiencing an adventure in consciousness and creativity that may or may not succeed but is always worth the attempt.



The writer would provide the basic direction and plot of the piece and perhaps write brief sections of dialogue, which like chord changes in jazz, would act as springboards for the actors to improvise.

The director must have an intuitive and intellectual understanding of the project and be able to inspire the actors to delve deeply into themselves to express characters different from who they are.

The project should be fun. Nothing is more tedious than an adventure that takes itself too frivolously or too seriously.

So that's my proposal. ■

Aug. 29th @ 6:30 PM
Tightrope improv
Location: Faithful Fools
234 Hyde St.

Call Ed Bowers' cell for info:
(415) 368-8116

OBITUARIES

GEORGE KISSACK A real man, a good man

Affable George Kissack was living on borrowed time the years he lived in the Plaza Apartments. Maybe it was the finest chapter of his life. Penniless, but happy and loved by his friends, the thin, 5-foot-8 man who used a cane, ignored the past and lived each day laughing and joking.

A black man stood at Mr. Kissack's July 7 memorial and gave a good account of the friend he had smoked hundreds of cigarettes with over a couple of years while swapping jokes and yukking it up.

"He was a good man, a straightforward man who told it like it was. Once some of us were outside and he stuck his head out and said, 'Whew, there're too many black men out here, I'm outnumbered,' and he went back inside."

The men outside had laughed, and the 14 mourners who heard the story laughed, too.

"When I heard he died," the man continued, "it hurt me, like when you lose a family member, that kinship. He was one of the few real men I've met living here."

Not a lot was known about Mr. Kissack other than he was from Seattle and had a brother there. In September 2007, he moved into the year-old \$22 million Plaza Apartments at 6th and Howard streets which were planned

originally for low-income residents but switched by Mayor Newsom before construction was finished to become housing for the chronically homeless. Social worker Joanna Menendez said Mr. Kissack, an alcoholic, had been homeless in Golden Gate Park for many years and had prostate cancer when he arrived at the Plaza. He had been given two to three months to live. But he lived almost another four years.

"He was really happy to be here," Menendez said.

Mr. Kissack's cancer returned in May, and he was taken to Laguna Honda Hospital, where he died June 20. He was 66.

"He was compassionate," a white man said. "He was more concerned about other people than he was himself. He was a very good man who brought smiles to a lot of faces."

Menendez read some of her written thoughts about knowing Mr. Kissack.

"Knowing his death was coming I was reluctant to let him into my heart," she read. "But I couldn't. He knocked on my door a couple of times a day, and he appreciated me being here."

She visited him once at Laguna Honda in his last days and accidentally saw a tattoo on his lower left leg. Its crude lettering spelled "Sally." She asked who Sally was. A tall, beautiful girl he danced with as a youngster in Seattle, he said. He had inked the purple tattoo himself, he said. It must have been painful to make his memory of her visible on his calf forever. A touching story, Menendez said.

"It took sickness to find out about Sally," she said stifling a sob. "Too often it's just momentous occasions when these things come out. But let's try not to keep our Sallys secret, and share more of ourselves." ■

— TOM CARTER

SOUTHSIDE



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