

# 'SMOKER' SMOKES

Rita Lukatsky

## Art imitates life in Tenderloin



Stage fight: David Tenebaum (Charlie), Joe Weatherby (Sol), and Dave Garrett (Mitch).

"Smoker," a play in 15 rounds, written by Michael Mace and directed by Laura Ellen Smith, was featured recently at EXIT Theatre, a fitting venue.

"Tenderloin is a vital place — drama everywhere," Mace says. Yes, the drama of constant struggle against misery for a better future — that's the

Tenderloin's history and its present. "Smoker" is also a drama, an artistic expression of humanity's lot to play out an endless dramatic fight.

The 15 rounds of verbal and physical "boxing" in "Smoker" take place in a highly charged setting. Mitch and Charlie, the fighters, love the same woman — Mona. Mona is pregnant, but we don't know



Playwright Michael Mace

by which of them. Mace doesn't give the audience an answer, and at the end Mona dies in labor. The dramatist deliberately plays with the uncertainty and his point is: it doesn't matter. Fatherhood — responsibility — comes unexpectedly. A man can't prepare. Everything in nature comes unexpectedly, suddenly, as a blast, as a hard jab in boxing. For Mace there is no illusion about harmony between man and nature. By fighting ONLY Mitch and Charlie are able to decide whose primal instinct is stronger, enabling the victor to take responsibility for the future, for the child.

"We get not what we want from fighting, but what we deserve," Mace told me in an interview after I'd seen his play three times. That's why there is a third male figure in the play — Sol, the referee. He is blind, he watches the situation with deep "inner" eyes and, like his namesake King Solomon, is there for justice. Mace said: "What we deserve is what each of us REALLY needs."

For the Tenderloin, "Smoker" bears some prophetic similarities. It's not a coincidence

that such a play, full of vigor and dramatic action, was featured at EXIT Theatre. "Smoker" comes from the critical intelligence of a young creative mind. Its picture of the world has many references to our neighbourhood, which is in the process of re-establishing itself.

In "Smoker," Mace, talking about love, deliberately avoids any romantic interpretation of the theme. He does just the opposite. He sticks to "naturalism," to the trivia of daily living and explores its fateful significance. When it comes to life, to surviving in a tough environment, you have to fight. For a young mind and a young social structure the primary issue is — where does the power "to stand up for myself" come from? Mace gives his answer: from the most basic life instincts. Mace deploys the idea of the moral neutrality of nature.

Fighting, Mace suggested in an interview, can be metaphorical or actual combat. In "Smoker" they fight for life, they battle for the future.

Mace doesn't know how many Tenderloin residents go to EXIT Theatre. After seeing "Smoker" I think they should. EXIT holds up the magic mirror of art for the audience to see the reflection of life's crucial problems.

According to Mace, the next incarnation of "Smoker" will be in New York as a staged reading and then possible production through the Hamm and Clov Stage Company, perhaps in early June. ■

## Poetry

SPOTLIGHT

Leonard Irving

The guy in 401.  
Talk about a louse.  
A dead beat.  
A real pain.  
A self-pronounced deer poacher.  
Played his TV full blast  
At all hours.  
Thought nothing of banging on your door  
in the middle of the night  
to bum a cigarette or a drink.  
His one claim to fame:  
A trained mouse.  
"Trained to do what,  
Sing grand opera?" I once asked.  
He merely glared.  
A liar. A thief.  
A petty swinder.  
Pilferer. Shoplifter.  
Mouse exploiter.  
Shit that he was  
He up an died last week.  
Who would believe the corridor  
Is lonely without him.

## Waiting for the 19 bus

that is always late  
a small crowd gathers.  
The bus pulls into the stop  
and beside the front step  
this young woman  
very very pregnant  
pauses to nod me  
ahead of her.  
Although it has taken years  
I feel my hair  
has turned white  
overnight.

MUNI

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## GOOD EATS with Phil Tracy

# Cambodian restaurateur specializes in Italian food

Little Henry's Italian restaurant has been in business at the same location for 19 years. It's a favorite with locals and visitors alike. Located on Larkin at Post, it became a favorite of mine when I started attending movies at the AMC 1000, which is on Van

PHOTO: CARL ANGEL



Chef Henry Tang

Ness, just south of Geary. Little Henry's is inexpensive, the food is good, there's never any waiting and it's open until 10 p.m. It's perfect for dinner after an early evening movie. They do not take credit cards or checks, however.

I took my niece to Little Henry's after we saw "Harry Potter." It was 8 o'clock on a Saturday evening, yet we were seated immediately. I ordered the veal parmigiana (\$8.45) and

my niece selected the chicken Florentina (\$7.95). The salad that came with the entree was Spartan: Iceberg lettuce and sliced tomato with your choice of Italian or 1000 Island. Both were store-bought dressings and the tomato was thinly sliced and pale. But the entrees ...

My dish featured two very big pieces of breaded veal covered with a thick tomato sauce and melted cheese. The mixed vegetables were steamed crisp, not soggy. I also received a side order of spaghetti.

My niece's chicken Florentina offered a breaded chicken breast with spinach and mushrooms covered with Hollandaise sauce, plus vegetables and spaghetti. She let me taste and I thought the sauce bland, but she felt it was just right. It was way too much for her so she asked for a doggie bag.

My second visit to Little Henry's was with Carl, our staff artist, for lunch. I felt like having fish, so I ordered grilled salmon (\$9.95) while Carl went with the breaded pork chops (\$6.95). Both were good,

unadorned but tasty and fresh, especially the salmon.

Both entrees came with salad and pasta. This time I selected rigatoni. I also talked the waiter into giving me a cup of clam chowder instead of the salad, recalling that salad with dinner.

Little Henry's has a full selection of seafood, including sautéed calamari (\$8.95) fresh clams with linguini (\$9.95) and a fisherman's stew made with sautéed shrimp, scallops, snapper, mushrooms in a wine cream sauce, also for \$9.95. The cioppino, with crab meat, shrimp, clams, calamari and fish of the day, in a light tomato sauce, is priced at \$13.95.

Little Henry's also serves a selection of steaks, a beef brochette with béarnaise sauce for \$13.95 and rack of lamb with mint sauce (\$16.95), the highest-priced item on the menu.

Little Henry's also has a full breakfast menu, which they serve from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., and nearly two dozen pastas that start at \$5.55 and soar to \$6.95 for the Tortellini al Fredo.

After paying our check, I asked to speak with the owner and Henry Tang came over and sat with us. Henry emigrated from Cambodia in 1978. Within a week of arriving in San Francisco, he was working in a restaurant. He worked in several, the majority being Italian restaurants. He learned to cook Italian and when he opened in 1983, he made Italian food his restaurant's specialty because he believed that most people preferred Italian food to any other cuisine. He thought a Cambodian restaurant would have a much harder time of it.

His restaurant prospered and in 1990 he opened a second in the Marina. In time, however, he found that operating two restaurants was more work than he wanted, so he closed the Marina restaurant in 1995. There is a Little Henry's located on Balboa near Seventh Avenue, but that is not affiliated with Tang. Another unaffiliated Little Henry's operated for several years on Golden Gate, near the post office, but that has been closed going on

two years.

A couple of years back, Tang closed Little Henry's for three months to renovate. A new back wall, floor and ceiling was put in and an ADA entrance. The 60-seat restaurant is clean and bright, filled with daylight from the new, enlarged windows. But décor is not what makes Little Henry's a winner.

When asked to what he attributes his success, Henry replied: "I know how to operate a restaurant efficiently and I know how to prepare food. It's very important to have affordable prices, but you have to have good food or people won't keep coming." Since a majority of his business is from the neighborhood, repeat business is absolutely essential to the restaurant's survival. With the help of his wife, Jade Guek Chea, a brother and sister-in-law and one other person, Henry Tang provides the neighborhood with a first-rate restaurant with an extensive and varied menu at prices people can afford. ■