

# Fringe Festival — take a romp on the wild side

BY ED BOWERS

MY life is theatre, a constant drama; therefore, I enjoy the rational theatricals created inside the private minds of playwrights attempting to touch others also desperate to be understood, or even forgiven.

Plays are a ritual. As in life, the actors are assigned roles; repeat performances result in them becoming one with the part. This ancient art form should be presented in a suitable environment: unpretentious, and surrounded by those who live in fear of being cast out. The audience is everything.

The Tenderloin is the perfect environment for the birth of creativity, just as the Lower East Side was in the '50s and '60s. EXIT Theatre has picked up on this and is running it full throttle through one of the most merciless and defeated zones in the city.

This is the most comfortable place I have ever seen a play. People can dress as they are, purchase hot saki and saki martinis as well as Anchor Steam beer for \$3.50, plus a miniature pizza, take these comfort items into the the-

ater, relax and watch the show. It couldn't be more relaxed.

Most in the audience were in their late 20s to early 60s, and did not look like they lived in the neighborhood. I'm glad of that. The Tenderloin is lonely for respect and attention from the majority.

People at large write off the Tenderloin as a zone where losers are exiled; they should understand that art is the science of perceiving what others do not already know, and that a rough neighborhood is precisely the source from which that lonely knowledge arises. When you see something so differently from other people that it hurts, you are a real artist, marginalized to the outskirts of normal life — unless, of course, they make a religion out of you. Then you are in trouble, and so is everyone else.

Now for the show, hosted by Mark Romyn, who is in charge of the Thursday night comedy club at The EXIT. He started out with a song about Spider Man, implying that this crude comic book character is a jerk full of heroic hyperbole. Amusing. I admire people who can sing and think at the same time; it's hard enough doing one thing. Besides, I can't sing.

Then came the main event — five-minute excerpts of seven 50- to 60-minute plays that are part of this year's San Francisco Fringe Festival.

The first presentation was "Adventures of a Substitute Teacher" by Steven Karwoski. It dealt with children who are emotionally retarded, throw spit wads at each other, and force their teachers to channel the drill instructor inside who becomes violently angry and screams at his students like a crack addict smoking vitamin pills. From what I gather it was a metaphor for human history. Entertaining.

Next was "& billions more." Two guys are sitting side by side, one is in his underwear. They are both worried about a black hole swallowing them. It's a stoner play. The two guys play off as opposites of one another, but it becomes clear after awhile that the guy in his underwear doesn't want to die in his underwear.

I hate repeating words. I never

thought I'd be forced to write the word underwear more than once. Therefore, RIPE Theatre, which created this piece, is an evil genius. Besides, the play was kind of funny in a stoner kind of way. I should know.

During this performance, to my horror, I realized that the serrated knife issued me to cut my miniature pizza was just inches from the back brain of the woman with big hair in front of me. The people who run The EXIT must have unlimited faith to hand out sharp objects to screwups like me. Commendable!

The next presentation, "Shopping as a Spiritual Path," was written by Terri Tate, who has a great sense of humor regarding her mouth cancer.

Having tasted a variety of cures for her illness, Tate finally decides to be honest with herself. She comes to the conclusion that bargain shopping made her feel far better than anything else; it was a spiritual path, leading to the final sacrament, the calculation of savings.

This piece is insightful and funny.

It is particularly relevant in these very materialistic times with nonstop shoppers, extremely sick people.

Next was Amy Tobin's "Organic Boxed Chicken Stock." A song was sung in this that wondered what trees, sitting there by the river, think. "Nothing has changed," they stated. That's all I remember about this one. I'd like to see it again to pick up the details.

Then there was a comfortable intermission.

Go to a fancy theater and it's "I'll Show Mine If You Show Me Yours" time, with everyone making their fashion statements and mumbling inanities like neurotics in a Woody Allen movie. But this intermission was laid back and fun.

Soon, Mark Romyn returned to introduce the next Fringe sample.

First was "Class Notes," a standup monologue by Kurt Bodden about his being a Harvard graduate. Bodden's routine was amusing. I hope he develops it a bit more. I found college to be among the most decadent of my life experiences, and could relate to much of what he said.

"Once you're in, you're in. There's no pressure," Bodden revealed about the academic standards of this prestigious school where the movers and shakers of America learn how to rule the roost. That explains a lot. Didn't George Bush

graduate from Yale?

Next a Korean man came out and performed "Korean Badass" by the Asian American Theatre Company and Stevie Lee Saxon. Maybe the Korean man was Stevie Lee Saxon. I don't know. He was very loud and visually commanding. I don't remember what he said, but all I could think about during the performance was that he could really get his act across if he became an Elvis Presley imitator, got up on stage with a gold lame outfit and a guitar, and began singing

what it is like to be a Korean badass in America. He looks perfect for the part.

That might not be nice, but it must be understood that for over a year I have been living with people who yell a lot, so it is my natural inclination to ignore anybody with a loud voice. My housemates are bad asses too, but they're not Korean.

The final presentation was "RM3," a world premiere of a new musical presented by UpMarket Production and RC Stabb. One of the actors who plays a politician looks almost exactly like Mayor Gavin Newsom. He sings in a well-trained Broadway voice.

"My philosophy keeps me walking when I'm falling down. I'm crazy, but I get the job done," he croons.

This musical is relevant to San Francisco politics and should be further inspected for insight. Catch it in its entirety when presented in full at the Fringe.

Finally, Romyn returned to offer people the opportunity to become volunteers for EXIT Theatre, an offer I might take him up on if my life becomes anything less than a war zone. Currently, there is no front door to my residence. Two of the macho men with whom I share this space knocked down the door twice in one day in a fight over a French woman. The door is dead. But THEY live. Now that's theatre in the Tenderloin!

Everyone should get out more. They should come down here and stop regarding my neighborhood as a communicable disease. The opportunity to see the baby in its crib, the beginning of great art, awaits anyone with the guts to venture here to see it. EXIT Theatre offers a professional, fun and relaxed environment for developing artists to present their work and develop it in front of an audience.

Support it! That's an order. But nobody listens to me, so I'm begging.

There are two kinds of people; those who

live their lives watching their paint dry, and those who take chances.

The audience is as much a part of the creative process as the playwright or the producer. I strongly encourage anyone who wishes to participate in a truly positive aspect of the San Francisco Tenderloin to contribute to it by patronizing EXIT Theatre. Come to the Fringe Festival. It's cheap, entertaining and comfortable.

At the very least, you will have fun. Plus, this show gave me a brainstorm. How about a play that would be presented in front of an audience of actors who stab each other for 15 minutes, while the actors on stage do absolutely nothing but witness the carnage, much like the U.N. observing in Darfur.

It doesn't get any better than that.

That's show business. ■

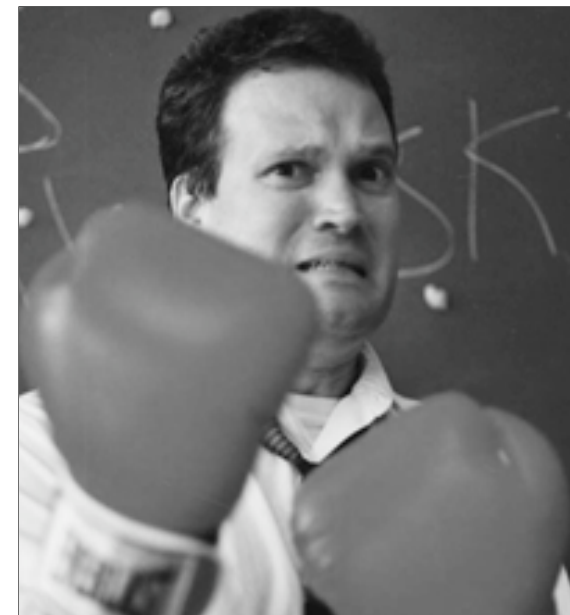


PHOTO BY GREG SLICK. CENTER PHOTO BY KURT BODDEN

**Right:** "Adventures of a Substitute Teacher," entertaining metaphor for human history by Steven Karwoski.

**Center:** "Class Notes," amusing standup monologue featuring Kurt Bodden.



PHOTO BY KEILYN MCKEEVER

**Political musical "RM3" features (left to right): Mayor Newsom lookalike Ricardo Rust, Gabriel Grilli, Stephen Pawley and Anna Isbida.**



PHOTO BY SARAH MCKEREKHAN

**Stoner play "& billions more" features (left to right) Mark Rachel, Deborah Wade, Noab Kelly.**



PHOTO BY KEVOM CARNES

**"Organic Boxed Chicken Stock" by Amy Tobin might need more than one viewing.**



PHOTO BY JO ANNE SMITH

**Nonstop shopper Terri Tate in "Shopping as a Spiritual Path."**



PHOTO BY SEAN POSEY

**"Korean Badass" Stevie Lee Saxon looks perfect for the part.**