

# My Spiritual Adventure in Civic Center Plaza *Charlie Parker was right, so I'm making moves with the Falun Gong*

BY ED BOWERS

THIS lone art critic, feeling in the mood to philosophize about why the Tenderloin is a rich field of creativity, one day woke up with a hangover. That made me decide to write about the small group of mostly elderly Chinese Americans, who — 7 a.m. to 10 a.m., seven days a week, in Civic Center Plaza, where the bushy green trees are in front of the Slow Food Nation Victory Garden — present a handful of exercises meant to cultivate the spirit.

This effort of theirs has made them one of the most politically incorrect, oppressed and despised group of weirdos in Communist China, the country that sponsored the Olympics while brutally and discreetly — behind closed doors — torturing and ruining the lives of the innocent men, women and children who practice these simple exercises.

It doesn't get weirder than that.

## THE BIZARRE HARMONY OF LIFE

Real artists are not religious, nor do they represent somebody's temporal or spiritual beliefs. That's why I love the Tenderloin. It's such a mass of contradictions that it cannot be reduced to anything even resembling an absolute. Improvised notes squeal everywhere and some of them are beautiful and many of them are gut-bucket dirty, but inside my mind their riffs resonate with a bizarre harmony full of life.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the mind is all there is; it brings existence into being and without it you are nothing. So cultivate intelligence and consciousness and enjoy it while it lasts, the cutbacks in education notwithstanding.

So I was walking through Chinatown with poet Charlie Getter on the way to the Beat Museum to see a guy who wanted to publish one of my crazy novels with the intention that afterward Charlie and I would hit the bars and have fun when we ran smack dab into a large Chinese parade.

I hate parades. I especially hate the large ones.

I know, "Everybody loves a parade."

But I don't. I am not everybody. I am only me and

parades cause me to turn into a Robert Crumb "SNOID," an old cumudgeon snarling to himself about jerks following each other off cliffs, celebrating war, and dancing to the tune of the same marching band that they've danced to since the beginning of death.

Parades bore me. But this parade was kind of sweet. The participants were decked out in colorful costumes, and the crowd appeared nonhysterical. Charlie and I found it easy to walk through the masses without being physically molested.

Then a smiling Chinese lady handed me a newspaper titled Falun Gong Today. The name rang a bell. I recalled reading somewhere that the Falun Gong practitioners were despised by the government of China.

## THE WALKING WOUNDED

I like people who are despised by their own people. I can really relate to them since the American people must hate my guts. They put me through so much horse manure in 59 years that I am lucky not to have gone as insane as many of my friends. So I have respect for those who have had a similar experience.

Inside the Falun Gong newspaper were photographs of women being tortured, their faces burned off, Chinese citizens who'd had organs harvested with the unfortunate result that they were forced to give their lives involuntarily to save the politically correct, and lots of gory graphic depictions of starved and tortured individuals who happened to have been born in the wrong place at the wrong time so they experience insane amounts of pain.

OK. I see the same thing every day in the Tenderloin. Big deal.

Once they push you up against the wall and you have nothing to lose, then you become the most dangerous human creature on the planet and you do either good or evil.

The losers in the Tenderloin, though, are hypnotized into killing themselves because, with their unbecoming lifestyles, they occupy no place in this society that is run by highly respectable people. The most potentially intelligent people in San Francisco live in this stinking neighborhood; and they suffer from being ignored out of existence and their wounds are mostly invisible.



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Ed Bowers, our art beat writer, even looks spiritual as he exercises with Falun Gongers in Civic Center Plaza.

tence and their wounds are mostly invisible.

So what's worse, mental or physical pain? Li Hongzhi, the founder of Falun Gong, seems to think it's mental. But I don't agree; I think it is six to one and half a dozen to the other, as the old cliché goes. Pain is pain, baby. I'm not a big fan.

## THE QUEST BEGINS

Okay. Even with The Tenderloin Art Critic, self-interest is a No. 1 priority. So, after glancing at the carnage depicted in the newspaper, which to me was just another tedious example of "normal human life," I cut to the back of the paper for what I needed for myself.

After years of studying various esoteric systems I knew that Falun Gong was a branch of qigong, which cultivates the primordial energy of the Universe. I needed a little shot of that right now to prop me up. So I was going get it if it was the last thing I ever did!

Once an addict, always an addict.

On Page 14, photographs of beautiful white men and women were shown doing Gong exercises. Also on the page were phone numbers I could call to learn how I too could be a beautiful white man doing these movements.

So I called the proper number and connected with an extremely frenzied Chinese woman whose voice resonated with such stress that it squawked like she was in a

compound surrounded by Hells Angels on speed who just love to bifurcate screeching Chinese women and bury them in holes and then smoke a joint to celebrate their victory for God and America.

## "GO TO CIVIC CENTER PLAZA! SEVEN O'CLOCK!"

"Excuse me, what did you just say?"

She heroically repeated herself, and I finally got it.

And now I'm doing it. I am performing these exercises in Civic Center Plaza two to three times a week surrounded mostly by Chinese people. I must stick out like a banana in a bowl of mandarin oranges. Tourists from all over the world take our picture. Great propaganda for American diversity!

When I don't show up, the sweet people who have practiced this dangerous path that could get their organs harvested in China are concerned, and actually seem to miss me if they haven't seen me in a few days. That's more than I can say about most of my friends.

Well, no pain, no gain.

## SPIRITUAL PURPOSE OF EXERCISE

I now occasionally find myself standing in Civic Center Plaza doing The Falun Standing Stance Exercise, which is extremely painful and which I attempt to avoid by not showing up on time to do it.

This exercise involves placing your arms up in the air for a long period of time as though you are under arrest, perhaps by government officials who want to burn off your face. The spiritual purpose of this painful exercise is to burn off karma.

Now that is art. Art is created out of pain.

You don't get to where you want to go either in a painting, a song, or poem, unless you pay your dues. Charlie Parker was right. Unless you experience it, it will not come out of your horn.

I will return to do Falun Gong in the plaza, though I am absent today. With any belief system or spiritual practice or theory, I am like a dog I once had who left for six months, then returned dirty as a skunk, asking for food and affection, then finally left for the final time to die alone.

I would suggest this practice for anybody in San

Francisco who wants to see dozens and dozens of people walk by them in a purposeful manner. If you really want to see people in this city, then just stand there and do your exercises. You will appear to be doing nothing comprehensible, while the others will appear to be going somewhere extremely meaningful.

In my opinion, all appearances are artistically deceptive. But that's just me.

I think it would be a kick and a half if hundreds of San Franciscans, stressed out by their stupid workaholic lives, took time out to cultivate themselves. And it's free!

## NO STRINGS ATTACHED

My instructor, Judy, has given me hundreds of dollars worth of lessons for nothing, no strings attached. She is a nice, middle-aged Chinese woman who has been a faithful follower of this program for 10 years, and is an excellent instructor who has taught me the subtly slow movements with precision. She can pick up on any mistakes I make from 10 yards away.

So what more can you ask for in a city that is overcharging you to live your life? You get exercise, make a statement for individual rights, tweak a totalitarian government, get to observe hundreds of different people walk back and forth in front of you, and cultivate yourself!

I find this practice extremely healthy and good. So give it a try. It's an adventure in consciousness.

But I warn you: I have no allegiance to anything other than people who mind their own business, allow others to be themselves, and are wise and compassionate in their dealings with others.

If this group got famous and powerful and started to rule the world, I would be like Jean Genet when asked what he would do if the Palestinians he was supporting became dominant.

"I would repudiate them," he said.

I suppose that's why he was a real artist.

In the meantime, I really like these people and I think they should be supported. They're cultivating the human spirit! Go on down and work out with them.

Maybe I'll see you. Maybe I won't. ■

# Lots of plays for kids at Fringe

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on scraps of paper they found in the Mission District.

Hara says she and Richie were intrigued by the mysterious origins of the handwritten letters, notes and even post-its they discovered around their neighborhood, ranging from a grandmother's letter to her granddaughter that Richie found in the floorboards while cleaning her apartment, to a piece of paper where someone scrawled, "I will work hard so I will change" 25 times. "There was something moving and touching about that," Hara says. "Who wrote these things? What does it say about them?"

She and Richie created a series of songs and scenarios based on their found objects, including a Cinderella-like vignette inspired by a single shoe found in the street.

Another San Francisco offering — "Tenderloin Christmas Hustler," by Jake Eastman, Demetrius Martin and Todd Pickering — definitively answers the question, "Is nothing sacred?" This send-up of traditional holiday entertainment fare was inspired by a Christmas theme party last year in the Tenderloin. According to Martin, Pickering had dressed for the event in red and green, as well as a liberal spray of glitter on his face. He then made his way through the neighborhood on foot. "I felt like a Tenderloin Christmas hustler," he remarked when he arrived at the party, and lo, a play was born.

The trio lifted characters from standard Christmas television show and films, rewrote lyrics to carols, and in general turned the holiday on its head. "We're having a ball in rehearsals," says Martin, who hopes to reprise a longer version of the show at another San Francisco venue at Christmastime. "We have more material than we can squeeze into 50 minutes," he says.

Many Fringe Festival plays are strictly for adults, but there are plenty of performances for children. "After-party" features acrobatics, juggling, dance, music, improv and puppetry by Pi: The Physical Comedy Troupe, for kids age 5 and older.

Ages 9 and up might also enjoy "51 & Counting," a musical by Mary Ann Boyd that looks hard and sometimes lightly at the 51 jobs she's held in her 47 years. Boyd, who lives in the Bay Area after several years in Seattle, has been a receptionist, waitress, substitute teacher; she's also cared for the elderly, tended

bar and sung telegrams for a living. Inspired by a suggestion from a local comedian and teacher, Boyd started writing "51 & Counting" in 2001, while living in Seattle. The play has been morphing ever since (she's had seven other jobs in the meantime), but the central theme is the same: She just wants to pay the bills, but she's driven in other directions by her alter ego, who wants much more. "It's about taking yourself seriously, rather than fitting into society or being what your family wants you to be," says Boyd.

The festival's Website notes which performances are appropriate for children in a detailed thumbnail sketch on each work.

Definitely leave the kids at home for graphic productions such as Alex Bond's "Late Night With the Boys: Confessions of a Leather Bar Chanteuse," or "Loving Fathers," Joe Besecker's look at two gay lovers who are sexually attracted to their own fathers. Edgy topics may raise eyebrows, but they are entirely in keeping with the fringe-festival concept, which is to encourage risk-taking, stretch boundaries and explore new ways of telling stories.

That's one reason S.F. Fringe productions are chosen by lottery, rather than traditional selection processes, says Christina Augello, EXIT Theatre co-founder and Fringe Festival producer. Augello hosts a lottery party each January, where submission titles are dropped into a hat. This year, 15 local, 10 national and 5 international works were selected for performance at neighborhood theaters; the other 18 offerings will be produced at satellite venues. "This is the biggest festival we've had in years," she notes.

"It's a unique concept, and promoting it is very important," says Augello. "A lot of people trying to break into the performing arts have a difficult time getting their work in front of an audience." They definitely need some luck — this year, the Fringe lottery attracted 147 entries, says Augello.

The total festival audience is 7,000 to 8,000 participants, and Augello believes low ticket prices are one reason why. Most tickets cost from \$7 to \$11, depending on whether purchased at the door or online. Five-show passes go for \$35, 10 shows for \$65.

For a complete list of performances, schedules and ticket information, visit the Fringe Festival Web site, www.sffringe.org. ■

# Doors to perception open on Tenderloin streets

I'M on the corner of Mason and Eddy, swaying and hopping, walking in circles, talking excitedly into the air. Am I serenading the Hotel Bijou? I'm rehearsing for my solo show! "The Doormen" premieres as part of the 17th annual San Francisco Fringe Festival.

My show is an outdoor walking tour; the Bijou is my first stop. Today's invisible audience is great. They laugh with me through a short tale of good intentions, folly and grace. I take a quick bow to the lamp post and off we go to Ellis. Each tour stop is an actual doorway or portal in the neighborhood near the EXIT Theatre.

The deep theme of "The Doormen" is that lovers and others change our lives for the good by metaphorically opening doors for us. The reality is many or most of these doors are life passages we must then cross over alone or, at least, without "the doorman." Getting to and through each door, then closing it, can feel joyful, trying, or even tragic.

The friend taught you to cook, then years later you open a restaurant. The co-worker's challenging style inspires you to strengthen your spine, now you're a manager. The ex showed you things about yourself that got in the way of your love, now you have a meditation practice. None of these people cross the threshold with you, but they had the key. I hope to convey this with thanks, wit, laughter and sass in my show.

I don't need a permit to perform outside on city streets, but I've needed to re-site the tour a few times. Some outdoor spaces are public and some are private, sometimes by a matter of inches. My show about transition is going up in a neighborhood full of transition. A big, elegant condo complex is rising next to the Hotel Bijou on Mason. SRO residents are sometimes described as being "in transition" — though some may live in a hotel for years. Boeddeker Park is

up for renovation. Literal and symbolic doors in the Tenderloin are opening and closing like a neighborhood rhythm section.

Doorways are for going places, so my show walks the sidewalk. My audience of 16 is about

the number a sidewalk can hold. That's 32 shoes per show en route. Guests are greeted at the EXIT Theatre (156 Eddy) by my box office assistant who doubles as traffic and safety watch on the tour. Over an hour or so, we visit six doorways

for lively and poetic tales loosely based on my life's real "doormen."

Then it's back to the EXIT to catch another of the Fringe's 48 adventurous shows. ■

—BARBARA MICHAELS



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Barbara Michaels rehearses "The Doormen" in the doorway of the Hotel Bijou on Mason at Eddy.

"The Doormen" will be performed at 7 p.m. Sept. 3 through 6 and Sept. 10 through 13, and at 4 p.m. Sept. 6, 7, 13 and 14. The show begins and ends at the EXIT Café, 156 Eddy St. Tickets cost \$7.