

Introduction

I first saw the San Francisco Mime Troupe perform at the outdoor Saturday market in Eugene, Oregon, in the late 1970s. The production, *Hotel Universe*, seemed right at home among the tie-dyed clothes, produce, and hand-crafted goods for sale in the stalls there. At the back of the small portable stage, a colorful curtain bearing a cartoon painting of a hotel hung from a pole. The props and costumes were simple. The cast, comprised of seven actors, black, white, and Latino, played quirky caricatures of the elderly inhabitants of a low-income residential hotel and the nasty landlord trying to evict them. The style was broad and farcical. Actors sang and danced and talked to the audience while a small band played upbeat music. Spectators booed the landlord's threats and cheered when Gladys, Myrna, and Manuel decided to fight back, singing what would become one of the troupe's most popular songs: "We Won't Move." The performance was free, and spectators, some with noisy, excited children, crowded around the stage. The spectacle gave me a new understanding of the power of "rough theater," British director Peter Brook's term for performances where audience and cast alike become participants in a raucous celebration of resistance.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe is not silent. "Mime" in their title refers to ancient Greek and Roman mime—scenes and characters from everyday life performed in a ridiculous manner. Although the company has experimented with a variety of styles during its forty-five-year history, ancient mime, with its exaggerated, highly physical acting style, has been a constant. Shows are colorful, noisy, and festive, often touching the same nerve that gives spectators the urge to run away and join the circus. Some have. Throughout the troupe's history, their performances around the country have attracted new members.

During the 1960s, the Bay Area was the heart of the American counter-

2 The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader

culture movement, with flower children in Haight-Ashbury, the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley, and rock concerts in the Fillmore Auditorium. The San Francisco Mime Troupe was the movement's theater. By the end of the decade, two national tours extended the troupe's increasingly radical reputation across the country, where, in addition to performing, members participated in antiwar demonstrations and led protests. On two occasions, actors were arrested during performances, acts of censure that only added to the troupe's reputation.

The troupe is the longest-running political theater company in U.S. history, and their tenacity is part of their message. The company's very existence is emblematic of their determination to keep on fighting for human principles in a world that values profit over people. Theater historians generally group the San Francisco Mime Troupe with other mid-twentieth-century ensembles producing original work: Living Theatre, the Performance Group (later the Wooster Group), Open Theatre, Bread and Puppet, El Teatro Campesino, and Mabou Mines, and in fact, three of these companies are closely related to the Mime Troupe. Mabou Mines, founded in 1970 by former troupe members Lee Breuer, Ruth Maleczek, and Bill Raymond, was influenced by the troupe's early aesthetic experimentation. Bread and Puppet, an East Coast contemporary of the Mime Troupe founded in 1960, exchanged staging techniques with the group at the Radical Theatre Festival in San Francisco in the late 1960s. The third participant at this festival, El Teatro Campesino, had already been deeply influenced by the troupe's style and politics. El Teatro founder Luis Valdez joined the Mime Troupe in 1965 after seeing them perform at San Jose State College. Valdez left later that year to work with Cesar Chavez organizing farmworkers in Delano, California, where El Teatro Campesino became the theater arm of the United Farm Workers union.

The Mime Troupe takes its message of political empowerment and social change directly to the people. Their free performances in parks in and around San Francisco every summer since 1962 have become an institution, attracting as many as three thousand spectators to a single performance. Many audience members return year after year to have their politically progressive ideals reinvigorated. Some have grown up with the Mime Troupe, and now bring their children and grandchildren.

Troupe founder R. G. Davis always insisted on theater unencumbered by ties to government and corporate funding, so after performances he would pass the hat for donations, a custom that has persisted to this day. For most of the 1960s the troupe survived solely on these personal contributions, and proceeds from college appearances. However, staging free theater in an increasingly costly world became difficult, and these lofty standards eventually gave way to economic necessity. In the 1970s the troupe applied for and

received local grants; in the 1980s, national grants; and, in the 1990s, corporate grants, representing a final surrender of the company's original commitment to economic autonomy.

The troupe's internal structure changed at a much more accelerated pace, with radical alterations at the end of the first decade. From the company's founding in 1959 until 1969, R. G. Davis was artistic director and made all final artistic decisions, as do most artistic directors in American theaters. However, because of the company's evolving Marxist ideology, members began questioning the organization's traditional hierarchical structure and wanted more participation in decisions. In December 1969, when members voted to reorganize as a collective, Davis resigned. While many signature elements remained after collectivization, including the broad acting style, free admission, and productions in the parks, the split was traumatic, causing long-term emotional aftershocks. Given the enormity of this organizational change, its ideological ramifications, and the resulting loss of the single artistic vision of the company's creator, it is necessary to consider two distinct troupes: that of the R. G. Davis decade (1959–69) and that of the collective (1970 to the present).

One fundamental change in the troupe's ideology after 1970 was its definition of the target audience. To whom was their message of social change addressed? While Davis's mission had been to challenge the assumptions of liberal, educated, white spectators, the post-1969 collective determined to build a multiethnic working-class audience. They quickly realized that in order to accomplish this, they had to change the demographics of an organization that was, in 1970, primarily white and college educated. In 1974 they took the unusual step of no longer hiring white actors, and by 1980, had achieved an ethnic diversity that predated the multicultural trend in the arts so prevalent in the later 1980s. Then the troupe, as a microcosm of our racially charged American society, had to grapple with internal conflicts that inevitably arose, especially when working on plays that focused on racial issues. In addition, the use of stereotypical ethnic characters, a stock feature of many productions, has not always been well received by the public. Representations and other questions of race have been a minefield throughout the troupe's history. The descriptions in this book attempt to portray these conflicts accurately. As a pioneering multicultural company, the troupe's challenges and how they dealt with them can be instructive.

In general, the collective organization of the troupe has changed over time from utopian to pragmatic. Practical elements of running the business (such as hiring a professional office staff) and outside forces (especially establishing a contract with Actors Equity, the stage actors' union that presupposes a traditionally structured theatrical organization) have tempered the troupe's original collective design, but they remain a worker-owned

4 The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader

organization. This commitment, in the face of all obstacles, has kept their work vital and honest. A visit to the troupe's studio in San Francisco's Mission District reveals a small theater company much like others struggling to survive the hostile economic climate of the twenty-first century. An assortment of volunteers, interns, part-time and a few full-time workers staff the small office, which for a few years in the first flush of collectivization was run by company members.

Their commitment to a collectivist ideal has been tempered not only by practical business concerns, but also by the troupe's primary dedication to creating good theater. Although the collectivist ideology has usually served and informed their art, at times collectivism and good theater have been at odds. Casting in particular has presented challenges, when, for example, a past policy of rotating leading roles among the members conflicted with a director's casting choice. One of the company's strengths has been their determination to work through such struggles by spending hours and days in meetings trying to resolve internal conflicts and reach consensus. In general, however, when conflicts occur, art prevails over ideology.

The troupe has experimented with collective playwriting since 1970, and although there is no formula, today most shows are created in a quasi-collective process. Topics are usually agreed upon at the company's January retreat, when members discuss issues they feel are most pressing. The topic chosen often suggests a particular style, such as science fiction or film noir. All company members research the topic, and most shows are written by more than one person, sometimes a team of five or more, working with one or more lyricists. This process typically takes up to three months. A show generally has one director, who as in traditional theater has complete artistic authority over it. Because productions are created for the existing company, casting is often implicit in the script, but, as in traditional theater, the director makes the final choices. The rehearsal period is often little more than a month and follows a pattern familiar to anyone mounting a new play. Rewriting continues throughout rehearsals and into the summer performances. Performances in public parks open on or about the Fourth of July and continue until Labor Day.

Shows rarely observe stylistic purity, although a Mime Troupe style has evolved over the years. Because most shows are performed outside for a huge crowd, they are highly physical and involve interaction with the audience. All shows use at least some epic techniques derived from the theater of Bertolt Brecht, such as double and triple casting, signs, songs, and direct audience address. Comedy has dominated the troupe's repertory, but there are notable exceptions. During the troupe's first decade, *commedia dell'arte*, the highly physical improvised form of street theater from the Italian Renaissance, was the signature style; melodrama replaced it in 1970. All shows since the mid-1970s have been musical theater.

A distinctive feature of the troupe's shows after collectivization has been the comparatively high number of leading female characters. Joan Holden, the troupe's principal playwright for over three decades, created many of these roles for Sharon Lockwood, whose stage persona of earthy indomitability became a salient feature of these characters. It was Lockwood's feisty Myrna in *Hotel Universe* who kept the other residents resolute in their fight to save the hotel, and whose optimism electrified me at my first San Francisco Mime Troupe performance. Her characters were a beacon for more than twenty-five years during the Reagan, Bush, and Clinton years in the 1980s and 1990s.

My original plan was to publish a volume entirely of San Francisco Mime Troupe plays, but no comprehensive history of the troupe from 1959 to the present exists, and I have oriented the book to fill that gap. It attempts to place the plays in their historical and company context, while accommodating a maximum number of scripts.

This book draws heavily on conversations with, and writing by, people with a long history with the troupe. Because few theater companies persist as long as the Mime Troupe, critical longevity can offer insights that short-term acquaintance might overlook. Founder R. G. Davis is the authority on the troupe in the 1960s, and the author of *The San Francisco Mime Troupe: The First Ten Years*, published in 1975. Joan Holden emerged as the company's spokesperson during the 1970s. She has been interviewed frequently by critics and has published numerous articles on the troupe.

Several San Francisco critics important to the research for this book are longtime Troupers. Nancy Scott was an enthusiastic early fan who reviewed troupe shows in the *People's World* in the 1960s and remained a steadfast supporter of their work through her tenure until 1986 as theater critic for the *San Francisco Examiner*. Robert Hurwitt, a writer for the *Berkeley Barb*, *East Bay Express*, *San Francisco Examiner*, and currently the *San Francisco Chronicle* who received the George Jean Nathan Award for dramatic criticism in 1995, was an actor with the troupe from 1966 to 1967. He often places his reviews of the troupe within the context of the company's entire history. Bernard Weiner, theater critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle* from 1974 to 1990, worked with Hurwitt to have the troupe chosen for the special Tony Award for regional theater in 1987. Steven Winn, current Arts and Culture critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, began reviewing the troupe in the 1980s. Welton Jones, former theater critic of the *San Diego Union* (later *San Diego Union-Tribune*), is possibly the only out-of-town critic with a long track record with the troupe, from the mid-1960s to 1994.

This book is divided into decades starting with the 1960s, with the story of each decade in the troupe's history followed by representative scripts from the era. Also included is diverse commentary on the plays from the

6 The San Francisco Mime Troupe Reader

press and from artists who participated in the productions, in an effort to bring the scripts alive for the reader.

In assembling a book chronicling the long-lived and prolific San Francisco Mime Troupe, selecting a limited number of representative scripts presented a challenge. With topical political plays it is particularly difficult to predict which will remain relevant after their historical moment has passed. The final selection criteria included critical acclaim, historical relevance, popularity, stylistic and thematic diversity, and availability. *Hotel Universe* (1977), the most often produced show in Mime Troupe history, examines urban renewal and the loss of low-income housing, the subject of at least five troupe shows. *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel* (1965), an exposé of white liberal racism, became the troupe's most notorious creation. *Ripped van Winkle* (1988), a satirical look at a 1960s hippie lost in the consumer-driven 1980s, is probably the most popular of all troupe shows and one of the most blatantly self-referential. The troupe took on the Vietnam War in a comic-strip style in *The Dragon Lady's Revenge* (1971). *Factwino Meets the Moral Majority* (1981), modeled on Marvel comics, challenges right-wing Christian fundamentalism. *Back to Normal* (1991) skewers the public's vulnerability to the jingoistic hype over the Persian Gulf War. *Olive Pits* (1966) is a one-act from the troupe's commedia dell'arte era, and the short sketch *Telephone* (1970) demonstrates some of the troupe's puppet techniques.

Two plays in particular it pained me to exclude because of space limitations: *Steeltown* (1984), the troupe's examination of unemployment in the industrial Midwest, is now represented by a photograph; *Offshore* (1994), the result of a pan-Asian collaboration critiquing globalization at the end of the twentieth century, is represented by one scene and one song.

I have included lyrics, photographs, and graphic designs from a forty-year span, chosen to illustrate stylistic diversity and to invoke the presence of some other productions. A few photographs include spectators, illustrating the spatial relationship between the stage and the audience; some demonstrate Mime Troupe techniques. Michael Bry's photograph from 1985 shows how the troupe staged a nightmare Reagan Supreme Court with giant puppets. Marian Goldman's photograph from *False Promises* illustrates the troupe's use of Brechtian staging techniques. Poster designs can also capture the essence of a show. Fortunately, much poster art from the troupe's previous productions can be tracked down, as many were printed by Inkworks Press in Berkeley and are still sold in the "boutique" at troupe shows. Five posters are reproduced in this book.

Spain Rodriguez has designed troupe graphics for over twenty years. He created most of the illustrations that appear in letters to potential contributors in the 1990s. Five of his designs, including a comic strip he published in

the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* advertising *Factwino vs. Armageddonman*, are included in this book.

Grassroots organizations such as the Mime Troupe often work with numerous people in the local community. The troupe's fortieth anniversary program includes a list of about four hundred people who have worked with the company since its inception. Those mentioned in the following pages will have to stand for the rest.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe has been underestimated in American theater history, where the East Coast gets most of the attention. I have tried to correct that imbalance by writing about a company that has been influential in keeping alive an ancient theater tradition that is at home in the west, where there are fundamental aesthetic differences from the east. West Coast theater is more physical and less intellectual—more grounded and less conceptual. This could be the legacy of our Wild West history, but I think it's the weather. It seems no accident that three existing California theater companies (Dell'Arte Players, the Actors' Gang, and the San Francisco Mime Troupe) are rooted in Italian commedia dell'arte, a form of theater best realized in the open air. Free theater in American parks has its historical roots in a warm Mediterranean climate with a sociable culture.

However, the San Francisco Mime Troupe's tradition reaches even further back, beyond the Italian Renaissance to Greece, where ancient audiences made pilgrimages to Athens to see how Aristophanes would satirize their community. Similarly, every summer thousands of contemporary spectators pack lunches, children, and sunscreen and head for San Francisco parks to see the Mime Troupe lampoon current events and ridicule public figures. Although it's been years since the company was charged with obscenity, and the shows rarely shock or astonish anymore, there are ancient echoes in the ways the troupe brings the community together each year to celebrate the possibility of social change.