

Dialogue, music and mime

Goodbye tradition, hello white face

By RICHARD WIENS
Of the Emerald

Pity the poor mime. He cannot speak and he must create an environment in his own mind. Then, somehow, he has to express that environment to his audience. It is a cross few actors are willing to bear.

Rather than abandoning this white-faced relic of classical theatre, a group of young Eugene actors have set him free. Members of the New Mime Circus mix traditional mime with dialogue,

would be restaging scenes the day before a performance?

"The piece is still growing," says Lynch. "The development process doesn't end when we open the show."

This "development process" has been evolving ever since the New Mime Circus was formed by Judith Barker in 1972. Barker had earlier started a mime troupe in Boston, but came West to escape "the generally unhealthy stuff that goes on backstage in traditional theatre. I had always had a fan-

thesizer, because I listen to everybody's ideas.

"When we begin work on a piece, we do what we call 'discovery work.' I don't preconceive of what the production is going to look like, because everyone needs to find the parts of the characters they can relate to. When cogent features emerge from the improvisation, we discuss them and decide what to use."

Right up to the time of a performance, Barker advises the actors on ways to improve their work. Then again, "if I'm on stage, they'll be giving me feedback. It's all a fluid process."

Until receiving a federal grant last July, the NewMime Circus performed only one-act plays and skits, seldom making money. All the actors had other jobs or went to school, and the group would sometimes go for months "studying" theatre but giving no performances. Now it works fulltime, occasionally performing full-length productions, and takes home at least \$540 each a month.

The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) grant also allowed them to hire three versatile musicians for accompaniment, led by singer/guitarist, Sue Davis. The musicians rehearse daily with the actors at the mime circus' headquarters on High Street, participating even in the group's most bizarre fits of "improvisation."

"One day we got into portraying all the roles as little children — musicians included," recalls drummer Tom Sassano.

In addition to a host of short skits, the NewMime Circus has tackled long plays such as Arthur Miller's "The Creation of the World," Eugene Ionesco's "Mac-Bett" and one-act plays like Shakespeare's "Pyramus and Thisbe."

Their stages have been even more diverse, ranging from the downtown mall to the living room of Good Samaritan Nursing Home. They presented "Humulus the Mute" on all three levels of the EMU Lobby.

"We enjoy working in different spaces, both indoor and outdoor," says James Aday, producer of the mime circus. "We adapt to the environment — that's why it's exciting performing on different stages."

The day after their final rehearsal of "Pyramus and Thisbe," their stage is the Dexter Theater. With its rounded steel roof, it looks more like an airplane hangar. The product of a Depression-era work project, it is now a community center of sorts for this bend-in-the-road town 18 miles southeast of Eugene.

The actors arrive in 80 degree heat hours before showtime. Getting ready is a long, drawn-out process of going over lines, improvising as they did the day before and setting up musical equipment. They do their final warm-ups — stretching exercises and yoga — after the audience arrives.

"It's our way of opening up to the audience," says Lynch (Pyramus). Unfortunately, "the audience" includes only 15 paying patrons, so Lynch and two other colorfully costumed actors go outside to do some recruiting. Meanwhile, the mime circus' juggler, Gary Calder, gets the show rolling by juggling everything from basketballs to clubs, some while riding a unicycle.

Outside, the actors wave at passing cars and encourage some kids on bicycles to come inside. When told a juggler is performing, the kids get interested and dismount their stingrays. They lack the 50 cents child admission fee, but the box office man lets them in free.

The now-enlarged audience sits on couches and the floor within spitting distance of the actors as they present "Pyramus and Thisbe." The performance is surprisingly polished and professional, considering the day before's last-minute restagings.

The young lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe, end up committing suicide, each thinking the other is already dead ala "Romeo and Juliet." Unwilling to conclude the play in such a depressing manner, the NewMime Circus tacks on its own unique ending. As Shakespeare turns over in his grave, the actors perform a backward, speeded-up, non-speaking version of the play, like a rewinding videotape.

During intermission after "Pyramus and Thisbe," performers and spectators mingle. The musicians allow curious children to experiment with their less-breakable instruments. The mime circus is geared toward making the audience comfortable, and the result is a relaxed, friendly atmosphere.

After a brief guitar, vibraphone and bongo drums concert by the musicians, the mimes present a futuristic final skit, "The Applicant."

A man in suit and tie walks into a futuristic "office," resume in hand. He wants a job. Mannequin-like mimes attach invisible electrodes

to him and administer shocks. Meanwhile, he is interviewed by two women, who ask questions in unison with nasal twangs. The skit's meaning is hard to find, but the audience goes home happy, if somewhat puzzled. You don't see things like this in Dexter everyday.

Ironically, the NewMime Circus' spirit of continuous growth and exploration could lead to the group breaking up.

"I've reached a point in development where I'd be glad to do something else," says Richard Caves, an original member. Indeed, he says "everyone is developed to the point where if they want to do something else, they can."

The group recently had an "intensive evaluation session," according to producer Aday. "One of the things coming out is a strong desire to drop back, study and explore. Lately we've been pumping out show after show. If you do that too much you end up relying on techniques and tricks."

Barker, too, says the mime circus is in a transitional stage.

"Right now, the group wants more of a sense of ensemble direction. I can understand that and I'm eager to see where it goes. But I'm not certain that the next step for me is to immerse myself as an actor in the company while it's reaching out this way."

Whether the NewMime Circus continues to evolve or becomes extinct, it is clearly a success in the minds of its members.

"It might just stop," says Caves. "But it seems that everyone is so close to each other that even if it broke up, it might resurface again."



Emerald photo

In a new approach to Elizabethan drama, these people are staging a traditional Shakespearian play in a very untraditional manner. They're the NewMime Circus and not all of their performances are done in the traditionally silent mime. Sometimes even dialogue and music are used as part of their plays, skits and pantomimes.

dancing and the limited use of props.

The New Mime Circus is probably Eugene's least traditional theatre company. Consider a typical "rehearsal" the day before a performance:

After spending a few moments standing on their heads and limbering up their supple bodies, six young persons in colorful leotards buzz around a room, yelling and gesturing wildly. Some claim to be the mothers and fathers of others and set about disciplining their "children." One shaggy-haired man pauses to pick fruit from an invisible tree. Another is blindly led around by his seeing-eye dog. The leash he grasps is real, but the dog...there is no dog.

"We're living the parts of the character's lives that aren't in the play," explains Bill Lynch, a 29-year-old University graduate. "We're living out experiences that are suggested or hinted at in the script, but never take place on stage."

Lynch has a lead role in Shakespeare's "Pyramus and Thisbe," a spoof of the famous writer's own "Romeo and Juliet," which the New Mime Circus presented in the tiny town of Dexter.

Even when the circus' seven "actors" get down to a serious rehearsal of the play, it is clear they are far from ordinary. After all, what traditional theater company

tasy of a healthy type of theatre in which everyone helps each other. This is it."

The mime circus' first performances were spoofs of competitive sports at Hayward Field during the Olympic track and field trials. During the summer of 1972, they toured Eugene parks, giving fairly traditional silent mime performances complete with painted white faces. Gradually, they became more innovative, using dialogue, dancing, musical accompaniment and props.

"People get dissatisfied with pure mime," says Barker. "It doesn't sustain an audience for a very long time."

"For us, mime is such a natural part of our acting that people forget what we're doing. They accept it totally, and then they say 'where's the mime, man?' Sometimes people even get mad when we talk, because it's not pure. Well, to me, thank goodness it's not pure. It's so much more interesting to have multiple-aspects to the work."

"We're not producing theatre of the expected. It's entertainment, true, but it's designed to expand the audiences' theatrical awareness — make them laugh and feel and think new thoughts."

Barker is director of the mime circus, but she characterizes herself as a coach, "because I'm training people, and as a syn-

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