

Act I, Scene It All

By Robert Moll, *Syracuse University Magazine*, Syracuse U.

Shocking, vulgar, profane — it's underground theater

THEATRE SUCKS. That's the message painted across the back wall of the Annoyance Theatre in Chicago.

"We don't like to treat ourselves like a theater," explains Mark Sutton, an actor and director at the stage. That's as apparent in the theater's nontraditional set-up — a former plumbing supply warehouse that's strewn with beat-up couches and folding chairs for the audience — as in the plays performed there.

After five years, *Coed Naked Sluts* is the longest-running musical comedy in the history of Chicago theater. Improvisation inspired, it's your typical slice-of-life depiction of a coed prison full of perverts, killers and whores.

"It contains a lot of vulgarity and profanity, which gives it that little twist. But people like it and keep coming back," says Sutton.

Call it shock theater. Call it the theater underground — it's cropping up everywhere, yet it gets buried under *Les Miz*, *Speed* and *Melrose Place*. But some are discovering the hidden treasures that mainstream entertainment lacks.

Sutton recognizes most of the audiences at the Annoyance as college students, particularly from nearby De Paul U., Northwestern U. and Loyola U.

That doesn't surprise Luigi Salerni, theater professor and head of directing and play writing at Southern Methodist U. in Texas. He believes the audience for underground theater is "anyone who isn't afraid of having the braces on their brains expanded" — typically college students, he says.

"[Underground theater] encompasses any form of performance that's outside of the standard conventions of mainstream society," Salerni says.

You could hardly call what happens at the Neo-Futurarium, another Chicago theater, conventional. During each performance, writer/actor Greg Allen risks losing his head — literally.

"*Ax Me* is one of those things that pushes the limits of what is performance and what is real life," Allen says. The idea behind *Ax Me* is for Allen to come on stage with an ax, demonstrate that the ax is real and invite the biggest, meanest, nastiest-looking audience member to come on-stage. Allen then badgers the person into chopping off his head.

"Luckily, no one ever injured me in any way, although one night someone took a swing at me, which was really f—king scary," Allen admits. "I don't know if I'd ever repeat it."

Ax Me is part of the series, *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind*, and is one of hundreds of plays that might be per-

formed at the Neo-Futurarium each week. After rolling a die to determine your admission price and receiving a "HELLO MY NAME IS" tag with a given name that is far from your own, you are handed a menu of the night's plays. (The Neo-Futurists have this thing about doing 30 plays in 60 minutes.)

"The basis for this show is to create an audience-interactive event which is unreproducible, which will create something live between the audience and performers," Allen says.

After six years, *Too Much Light* still attracts loyal, young audiences. "The college audience is usually up for anything — a fun, new experience — and that's what *Too Much Light* is," Allen says.

Because students are so receptive to this style of theater, the Neo-Futurists frequently do college tours. The company recently did shows in Providence, R.I., New York City, Seattle and San Francisco.

Success with the Chicago student audience led Patrick Cannon to take his play, *Stumpy's Gang*, on the road to Los Angeles' Zephyr Theatre. In Chicago, students would return seven or eight times to see the play, Cannon says.

Described as a horror movie on stage, *Stumpy's Gang* uses three to four gallons of fake blood in each production. "People in the front rows are jumping out of their seats and moving a couple rows back," Cannon says.

Stumpy's Gang is about the relationship between Frank Bubman (pronounced boob-man), a bio-maintenance disposal engineer at a genetics lab, and three failed experiments he decides not to dispose of.

Stumpy's Gang incorporates live music, synchronized video and puppetry, and it too takes an interactive approach. To determine ticket price, wannabe audience members must spin a giant Twinkie (Bubman's snack of choice).

"It's an event," says Jim O'Heir, who plays Bubman. "Especially the midnight shows, when the audience has been out

Photographs by: Sean Hemmerle, *The Miami Hurricane*, U. of Miami



Underground theater takes a stab at opening minds.

drinking until 11:30. It's 80 to 85 percent college students, and they're lined up around the block."

Salerni thinks that underground theater on campuses can be a springboard to wider appeal. But even college students aren't always open to new ideas, he says.

"Universities, instead of being the bedrock of experimentation, debate and adventure, are the new bedrock of conservatism," he says.

That's what Cindy Gold, an assistant professor and director of the undergraduate acting department at the U. of Mississippi, found out last fall when the school produced *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*.

"They're not accustomed to seeing the subject of homosexuality presented in such an open way," Gold says.

One powerful scene depicts a character dropping his ring in the pool at a gay man's house. No one wants to go in and get the ring, out of fear of getting AIDS from the pool.

"There were people in the audience who were just squirming in their seats," says Paola Renzi-Callaghan, a graduate student and a main character in the play. Audience members either loved it or hated it, she says.

Greg Giblin, an Ole Miss sophomore, says a little controversy is good. "The more controversy the better, because then it slowly forces everyone to be open to all sorts of ideas. Sometimes art just has to break barriers."

Bryan Rice, a senior drama student at Carnegie Mellon U., agrees. Rice is a founding member of Pittsburgh Theatre Laboratories, a student-run theater company whose agenda includes raising awareness of issues and discussing events. The Laboratories recently produced *Hitler Dances*, a play that explores propaganda and war.

"Audiences may not always agree with what we're doing, but that's what it's all about," Rice says.

"Theater is magical. It allows you to transcend everyday ways of communicating."

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MARK SUTTON,
Director,
Annoyance Theatre



The crazy, cagey cast of *The Persecution and Assassination of Jean Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum at Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade*. Marat/Sade, a play as chaotic and revolutionary as its title, is the debut effort of the Akropolis Acting Company of Coral Gables, Fla.