

Off the grid, in search of Utopia

A new Hand2Mouth play explores human experiences behind intentional communities like communes

BY SARAH HANSELL
STAFF WRITER

The atmosphere of Hand2Mouth Theatre's new production "Psychic Utopia" befits its title – ethereal, intimate, experimental and brimming with flora and fauna.

The play is centered on the experiences of the thousands of people who immigrated to the Pacific Northwest in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, seeking a different kind of life through off-the-grid communities: communes, co-ops, co-housing and autonomous zones. Communities that are autonomous from the authority structure in which they are situated. Attempts at utopia.

The performers tell the audience these stories and act them out in ways that are metaphors for the play's content – the performers moving in unison, mouthing one another's words, delighting in human contact. The stories are bookended by audience interaction that is intentional from the moment the playgoers enter the venue; a thought experiment meant to compel the audience members to examine their own journeys as seekers.

"So many people stop seeking," performer Jenni Green Miller said. "We start the show by reminding, for lack of a better word, that we all may have been seekers at some point, starting in our childhoods, and then I think it's common for adults to stop.

And I think we end on this (thought that) all of us are still seeking at the end."

The play is built around 30 interviews and additional published accounts of people who lived in and co-created these communities. The stories span a wide range, from a woman who left her children behind, to a man struggling with mental health who experienced healing through his intensive work within a community and is now a therapist, to a young woman simply seeking to open her mind.

"We're trying to make a show where they seem suspiciously like us," director Jonathan Walters said. "You could see yourself having the original impulses. Maybe you wouldn't join that community, maybe you wouldn't go that far. Maybe you would go farther."

Yet they all follow a similar arc – a person seeking a change, arriving in one of these communities. Things fall apart, and then the person grows from the experience.

"The stigma is that there have been stories that things fall apart at a lot of communes, everything getting in the way,"



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said Liz Hayden, one of the performers. "People think about the extreme version that they read about in papers. But (with) our show, we've taken that out and really focus on their stories, them as human characters, just as seekers seeking something, like a calling."

The play isn't so much an argument for or against these intentional communities as a meditation on the lives of those who sought something different from the world they found themselves in and decided to look for, or build, the world that they wanted.

"I've been personally surprised about how negative a lot of people's reactions have been about some of the communities that we've talked about," Walters said. "It was so incredibly intolerant of a group of people choosing to live amongst us in a radically different way. Not choosing certain kinds of commercialism, not choosing to live in homes like we would think of."

This pushback, Walters said, reinforced how important it was to create this play. The play is a group-created labor of love, 18 months in the making. Its text has been a living document since the beginning, molded by deliberate ideas and inspiration, as well as improvisation from the cast, director and crew.

The result is a production that at times is shaped by audience response, and at times feels like the audience spying on deeply personal exchanges among the performers.

"We start the show trying to get the audience to feel like you're in a space with people who are really intensely linked, that have done a lot of work together with their mind, that have done a lot of time staring into each other's eyes," Walters said.

Most of all, the play is about the different ways in which people set out on a quest for self-discovery, self-improvement and self-healing, a quest to live differently.

"It's very dangerous, it seems like, in 2017, to believe there's nothing new to be discovered in how our society can move forward," Walters said. "That there's nothing new to be discovered in how gender should be talked about. That there's nothing new to be discovered about how America should work racially and work better.

"It's very dangerous to have no sense of wanting to go deeper and go forward. It's very dangerous for people to be in that mode, and it can be any side of the spectrum that people feel like, 'I got it, I got it figured out.' And these people are relentless in their quest for betterment and joy, and that's really inspiring."

An artistic representation of "Psychic Utopia." Performers move in unison, mouthing one another's words, in the Hand2Mouth production.

IF YOU GO

What: "Psychic Utopia," a Hand2Mouth Theatre production

When: 7:30 p.m. Nov. 16-Dec. 2 (no performance on Thanksgiving, Nov. 23). Matinee at 2 p.m. Dec. 3. Post-show discussions Nov. 16, Nov. 30, Dec. 3.

Where: New Expressive Works, 810 SE Belmont St., Portland

Tickets and information: hand2mouththeatre.org



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