

San Francisco Chronicle

NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Theatre

'August' intriguing despite production

Tuesday, May 20, 2003

By Robert Hurwitt

The Beginning of August: Comedy. By Tom Donaghy. Directed by Christian Phillips and Kenneth Vandenberg. (Through May 24. Actors Theatre of San Francisco, 533 Sutter St., San Francisco. One hour, 45 minutes. Tickets: \$5- \$20. (415) 296-9179, www.actorsheatresf.org).

Donaghy writes intriguingly microscopic dissections of the skewed lives of ordinary suburbanites. "The Beginning of August," in its local premiere at the Actors Theatre of San Francisco, should be a case in point.

Jackie, an uptight young commuter, has been deserted by Pam without warning,

leaving him to cope with their infant daughter. He's assisted, or impeded, by his recently widowed, needy stepmother, Joyce; an oddly immature housepainter named Ben with an intense crush on Pam; and by neighbor Ted, with whom Jackie's had a one-night stand. Through compromises, errors, seductions and blackmail, the characters cobble together a loose communal family by play's end.

Written in the bracingly disjointed dialogue of people who rarely articulate a complete thought, Donaghy's peeks through the cracks in the suburban facade have been popular in New York and elsewhere. He's been sel-

dom produced locally, however (the Magic Theatre staged his problematic "Minutes From the Blue Route" in '98). "August," which premiered at Orange County's South Coast Repertory, deserves a better production than it's getting here.

The 14-year-old Actors group has a pretty good track record for obtaining first local rights to plays by an impressive list of writers, including Christopher Durang, Nicky Silver and Kenneth Lonergan. Its actual productions, though, have been less rewarding. Curiously, for a repertory company that prides itself on its ensemble acting, inconsistent performances have long been one of its most consistent problems. Haphazard direction is another.

Directors Christian Phillips and Kenneth Vandenberg seem not to have settled on an acting style for "August." Christian Haines and Eleese Longino play Jackie and Pam in a muted, realistic mode that would work better if they conveyed more subtextual nuances. Susi Damilano's broad, better detailed Joyce seems to exist in a different production. Andrew Todhunter pushes his portrait of Ben for oddball humor, while Scott Agar Jaicks plays Ted as a kind of amorphous hick. It's a credit to Donaghy's

script that it remains interesting and often funny despite the production.

Honors among thespians: The San Francisco Mime Troupe will be one of five recipients -- with actor-director Joseph Chaikin -- of the fifth annual **Otto Awards for Political Theatre**, June 2 in New York. Named for Guatemalan poet and revolutionary Otto Rene Castillo, and presented by Manhattan's **Castillo Theatre**, the award announcement cites the Mime Troupe's 40 years as a "legendary anti-war and social activist performance ensemble." Previous recipients include Laurie Anderson, African American theater pioneer Ed Bullins (who used to run a tiny storefront theater in Oakland) and Ishmael Reed.

Awards are well and good, but at this time the troupe is hard at work creating its annual free-in-the-parks original radical musical comedy for its traditional July 4 opening in Dolores Park. One might think the task would be easy with the wealth of social-satire targets offered by the current White House gang, but one would be wrong. Too many tempting targets can be a problem and too many urgent issues another. Besides, as stalwart trouper Velina Brown observes, "The situations continue to get so extreme that they're very hard to satirize..."