

Reviews/Theater; The Middle East Comedy of Errors

By Mel Gussow

Nov. 16, 1989



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By courting controversy, the San Francisco Mime Troupe has remained in the vanguard of political theater during its entire 27-year history. The company's new show, "Seeing Double," certainly must be rated as one of its most outspoken efforts. This is nothing less than a bitterly satiric musical sendup of the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The traveling show (presented at the Triplex Theater) is so evenhanded in its criticism as to offend extremists on both sides. At the same time, it has a pronounced moral position.

In characteristic Mime Troupe manner, the story is a far-fetched farcical melodrama performed street-theater style. Two young Californians fly to Israel to assert conflicting claims to a specific piece of disputed land. One, an American of Palestinian origin, has a family deed to the property, while the other, who is Jewish, has discovered biblical proof that the land was ceded to his people thousands of years ago.

Each of the two characters is easygoing and individualized. Salim Razalis is a laid-back Californian addicted to MTV and oblivious to anything political - the opposite of his fervid Palestinian parents. David Goldberg is a back-to-kosher, neo-Talmudic scholar - to the horror of his parents. They hope he will grow out of it and will share the multi-ethnic diversity of assimilation (as he complains over dinner, "Thai takeout again?"). The story is made doubly chaotic and amusing by the fact that both young men are played by the same actor (Michael Sullivan), deftly switching roles, attitudes and accents.

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Their coincident flight to Israel (on Trump Fly-by-Night Airlines) averts a hijacking attempt by the Smokers Liberation Lobby and culminates in a crash landing. In a rollicking comedy of errors, Salim and David are mistaken for each other and each is accidentally transported to an enemy camp. Naturally, neither can distinguish friend from foe, with David momentarily finding an ally among the Palestinians in a young woman who shares his ardor for computer hard- and software.

Mocking militancy, the show is populated by such self-parodies as an Arab soldier who will not let her father enter his home until he remembers the password and the fierce spiritual leader of an Israeli outpost, an emigre from Brooklyn, who sings a rap song that sounds like kibitzing on the kibbutz.

The acrobatic cast dives in and out of beards and battle fatigues. Roles are cast without regard to gender or nationality (Mr. Sullivan, playing Arab and Jew, is black), which adds to the work's ecumenical absurdism. Most of the actors have mastered the company's comic-strip style of performance, especially so in the case of Mr. Sullivan. There is no trouble telling his two look-alikes apart, even when they are caught up in a quick-changing vaudeville chase around the soapbox scenery. All Middle Eastern problems would be solved if only the doubles could meet.

At various points, members of the four-piece combo are caught up in the action, catching flying briefcases and being distracted from their hybrid musical chores (the songs alternate between an Arab and an Israeli beat). Under the direction of Daniel Chumley, the show is, in every sense, a collaboration. The Mime Troupe's customary creation by committee (10 people are credited with authorship) results in a surprisingly unified cartoon in which nothing is held sacred except human lives and principles of freedom. The hardest thing for the characters to say is the dreaded C word, compromise. Beneath its outrageous surface, "Seeing Double" is a political satire with an urgent cautionary message. The Enemy Within SEEING DOUBLE, script: Sinai Peter, Joan Holden, Emily Shihadeh, Jody Hirsh, Henri Picciotto, Nabil al-Hadithy and Isa Nidal Totah with Harvey Varga, Arthur Holden and Nidal Nazzal; directed by Daniel Chumley; composers, Bruce Bathol, Randy Craig and Dan Hart; lyrics by Mr. Barthol, with Mr. Craig and Mr. Totah; musical direction, Mr. Hart; costume design, Callie Floor; set and backdrop design, Kent Mathieu and Ellen Callas; stage design, David Brune, Mr. Chumley and Harvey Varga/Concept Fabrication; lighting design, Gregory R. Tate. Presented by the San Francisco Mime Troupe. Through Nov. 22 and Dec. 1 to 10 at the Triplex Theater, 199 Chambers Street. WITH: Keiko Shimosato, Jeri Lynn Cohen, Harry Rothman, Ed Holmes, Michael Sullivan, Rebecca Klingler, Warren Sata, Isa Nidal Totah, Harry Rothman, Elliot Kavee and Dan Hart.

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