

Three Plays About Language and Food

AND by Robert Gordon, directed by Dane Ince; FOOD by Ross MacLean, directed by Rick Foster; LANGUAGE AS COMMUNICATION by John Angell Grant, directed by Paul Haxo. The Bare Stage, Trinity Center, Berkeley. Through Nov. 18.

By Robert Hurwitt

"You must not accept other people's plots, although you may steal them," George Bernard Shaw once wrote to an aspiring playwright. "Remember that if you accept even the name of a character from another person, that other person may put in a legal claim to be your collaborator and to take half your fees. You cannot be too careful until your play comes into rehearsal; and then, strange to say, the producer may alter the whole play and even write in additional acts (if you let him), yet the copyright in all his additions and alterations belongs to you, not to him."

Shaw's advice points up a feature of playwrighting that sharply distinguishes it from the crafting of other literary forms: the work is not truly finished until it has passed through the hands of others. The primary criterion for the success of a play is not how well it reads but how well it performs. Obviously it is essential for new playwrights to see their work in production as they develop their craft. Just as obvious is the fact that the relative scarcity of companies willing or able to produce new plays by local playwrights is a serious hindrance to the development of new writers for the stage.

Fortunately this problem has been receiving some attention of late. Actor's Ensemble of San Francisco and Berkeley's Black Repertory Group both host series of readings or productions of new plays. Berkeley Stage Co. does the same, as well as launching full-scale productions of new plays as part of its regular season. The cur-

rent production of three new short plays by West Coast writers at The Bare Stage would be welcome if for no other reason than that it serves this necessary function. But it is also, for the most part, a very enjoyable evening of theater as well...

Paul Haxo has done an equally good job in his local directorial debut with John Angell Grant's *Language as Communication*. This is a monologue in the form of a lecture, the title and topic of which are the same as the title of the play. The lecturer begins in a slightly hesitating, academic fashion and, as he warms to his topic, begins to reveal more about both himself and his topic than he intended. The format is almost a direct borrowing from Chekhov's *On The Harmfulness of Tobacco*, but Grant has used it so successfully that he has practically made it his own. Where Chekhov's reluctant lecturer never gets into his putative topic, but concentrates instead on increasingly embarrassing (and comic) revelations about his own hen-pecked existence, Grant's plunges into his with a determination that is hilarious in juxtaposition to the nonsensical double-speak of his text.

Grant has done a remarkable job of using language to communicate despite itself. With skillful use of obfuscation and non-sequiturs, he succeeds in making points about the various social uses of language and in giving us sudden revealing glimpses into the lecturer's character. The witty virtuosity of the text makes great demands on the performer and, fortunately, David Cohen is equal to the task. His near-perfect comic timing and expressive use of his face and body brought on wave after wave of unrestrained laughter. It was truly a fine performance.



THEATER