

Mrs. Munck
By Ella Leffland
Graywolf, 337 pp., \$8.00

Last Courtesies and Other Stories
By Ella Leffland
Graywolf, 218 pp., \$8.50

By Paul Skenazy

ELLA LEFFLAND HAS WRITTEN three wonderful novels—*Love Out of Season*, *Rumors of Peace* and *Mrs. Munck*—as well as the superb group of stories published as *Last Courtesies*. The latter two have just been reissued after being out of print for years. In each work, the characters live out their lives within and against the changing landscape of the Bay Area. She tells of people emerging from periods of withdrawal or stasis, forced to confront a clash of cultures at once temporal, spatial and sexual.

In *Mrs. Munck*, Leffland deftly parallels the title character's personal experiences with the transformation of Port Carquinez (Port Costa), once an Italian and Portuguese fishing village, into a resort and motel complex. We meet long-time resident Rose Munck immediately after her husband's death, as she is about to dedicate her widowhood to the care and persecution of Mr. Leary, her uncle-in-law. Leary is a 70-year-old invalid who, years before when Rose's boss, seduced and betrayed her, and was perhaps responsible for her baby daughter's death. Now, almost a baby himself in his incapacitated state, he is under her control.

Sacrificed to hatred

As her name implies, Rose was a "natural" creature when young: daughter of the farm, self-educated, dreamy, naive, optimistic; until, that is, her fateful meeting with Leary. Since then, she has sacrificed herself to hatred, living "like a nun...a priest" in the hermitage provided by her sense of victimhood. Solitary walks and endless reading have insulated her from her husband, her community and her own body.

Leary's presence (his name, too, suggests his essential character) reignites not only her passion for revenge but with it her memory, and her self-interest. She buys new clothes and a car, begins to talk to her neighbors, confronts the startling changes in her hometown and becomes involved with Husar, the broker for the resort company that wants to remake Port Carquinez. Her attraction to the developer suggests her vulnerability to the new forces of change that surround her, but Rose remains a holdout: the last homeowner who hasn't sold, whose private mission has preserved her from the greed that has overcome the rest of the community. Port Carquinez, with its grotesque outcroppings, its faded citizenry and its hidden natural wonders is like Rose's own craggy, broken surface of personality, yet Husar and his companions can only see both as opportunities for cosmetic surgery.

The tension of past and present, the known and the unfamiliar, the security of hatred and the danger of love and sexual desire climax for Rose in a series of surprising confrontations: with Leary, with Husar and with her own mother back on the farm. Rose needs to recognize her own stake in her years of self-denial, realize the consequences of her resistance to Husar and his plans and see both the fatality of her interest in the "circle of the dead" and the possibilities available in indepen-

dence.

Mrs. Munck is an angry book, given life by the intensity of a woman's hatred for a man and for a world dominated by compacts between the sexes that demand that women either submit to ordained roles or find their way in the world alone. The novel seems to suggest that for a woman, the two words of the title are redundant; marriage itself is portrayed as a mockery of love, sustained only by the inner lifelessness of the female.

At the same time, *Mrs. Munck* is not so much about a struggle between the sexes as it is a moving description of how personality can be stunted, and redeveloped. Rose is able to reassess the intricacy of her struggles for selfhood among conventions that control both genders: conventions that play their part in her mother's decision to find satisfaction as the long-suffering female attendant of several men, Husar's ambition to reconstruct the little fishing community into a playground for the vacationer and Rose's own determination to take solace in revenge.

Fourteen stories

On a smaller scale, the 14 stories of *Last Courtesies* describe similar situations of disorientation and discomfort. Generations, times and cultures collide, their different moralities and ideals rub bruisingly against each other.

Almost all the characters live, or travel, within the environments foreign to them. This is literally the case in several tales about young Americans wandering through Europe and elsewhere, and in other stories about Danes displaced in the U.S. and the Philippines and Russians seeking "last courtesies" in San Francisco.

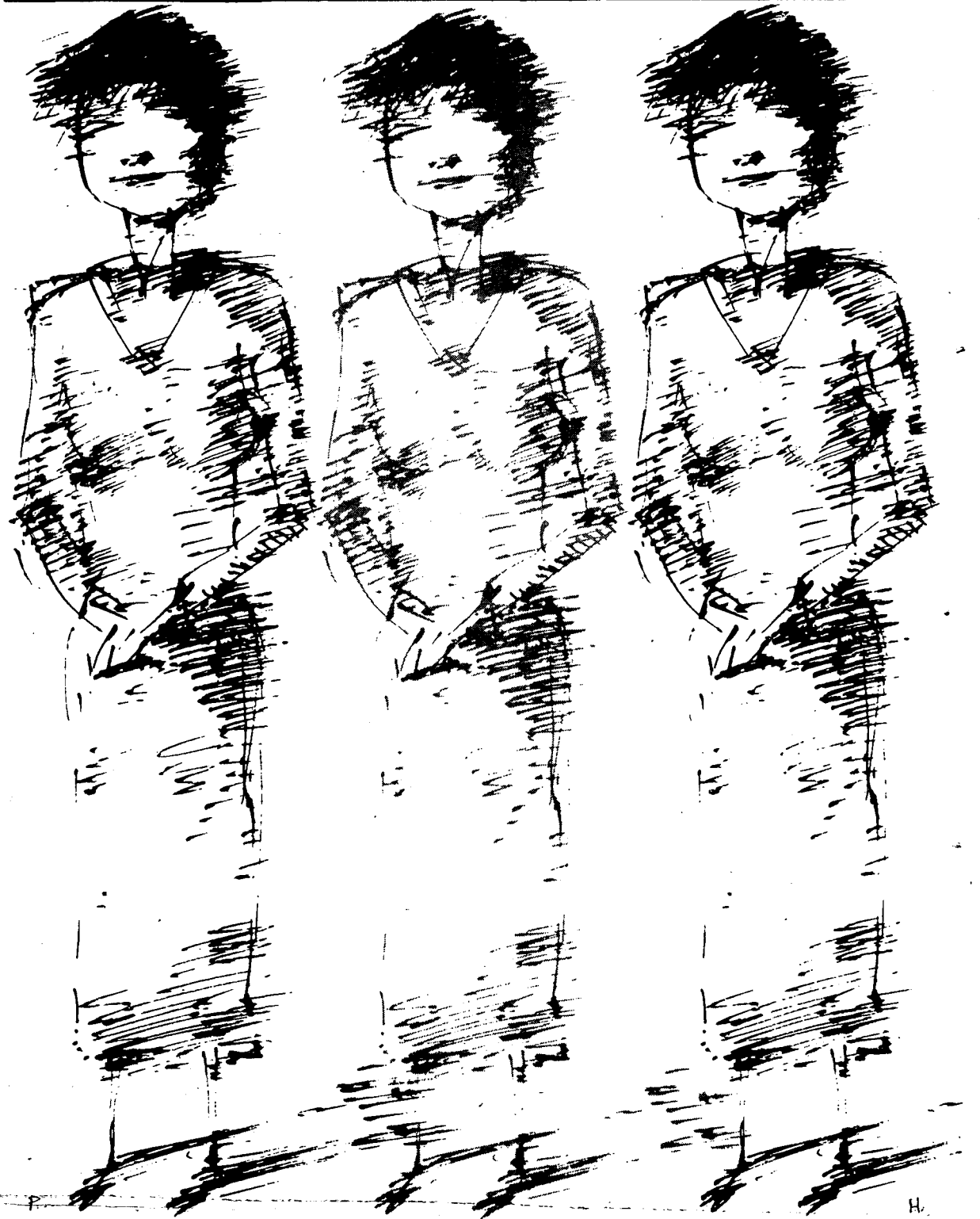
But the sense of foreignness is more metaphorically true of the book as a whole. Whether alone or with others, Leffland's people share an uncomfortable privacy and a damning inability to admit their discomfort to anyone else. Her people are least at home with, and in, themselves. They commune with objects, fill their world with ghosts, develop confirming lies about the past.

In almost all the stories, characters displace themselves onto the environment or project their frustrations onto other people, or into unknown belief systems, imagined traditions, ideals of a better and simpler time. The hopeful young artist of "Monsieur Scream" travels to the village where his father once lived hoping to prove himself. The young woman of "Vienna, City of My Dreams" begs and bribes a couple in a pension for the commonest form of notice. The woman in "Inside" is convinced that people who "stare" at her in parks or museums know the secret of her soul that she blames her father for never revealing to her.

Displaced Americans

Many of the young, displaced Americans who make up the majority of Leffland's protagonists are wandering from families who have ignored or discouraged them. The recognition they seek from others suggests that their vulnerability is a bitter aftertaste of childhood rejection and emotional frigidity that is both personal and cultural. They travel through Europe desperate and greedy, anxious to be absorbed into some imagined Old World of decorum, taste and beauty, anxious to discover a land ruled by time-honored relations among people, and between people and the sanctities of culture.

INPRINT



LITERATURE

Displaced Americans find home in Leffland's fiction



Ella Leffland

What they find instead are aged citizens who disregard their entreaties or misunderstand their requests or poor workers trapped in the wearing despair of their mundane habits. Against American projections and hopes, the Europeans offer their daily lives and the exactments of poverty.

There is a resistance to normality in the single-minded obses-

The majority of Leffland's protagonists are wandering from families who have ignored or discouraged them.

sions of Leffland's characters; they attempt to deny their commonality with the confused and compromised conditions of everyday life. But the stories also challenge the pieties offered by liberalism and embedded in the life-denying comforts and securities of marriage and family. Only perhaps in "The Linden Tree," about a gay man facing the

imminent death of his lover, does one find an accommodation that is not a defeat. The approach of death offers no vain comforts. But at least there is a community of shared feelings between the two men of this tale that has weathered time, helped them to soothe the raw fibers of desire with the balm of shared days, shared frustrations and pleasures, shared tastes.

These two books are Leffland's finest works, and it is a pleasure to see them made available again. They define an unaccommodating world, peopled by creatures uncomfortable with each other, often robbed even of the privilege of self-intimacy. But if they at times seem dark products of a troubled imagination, they are never gloomy. Leffland writes so knowingly, and so well, that one feels enlightened, not defeated—privileged to discover more about our private ploys and stingy ways with love, aroused by new comprehensions, prompted to a heightened attention.

Paul Skenazy teaches literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

By Robert Hurwitt

THE FIRST TIME I SAW the San Francisco Mime Troupe was one of those rare liberating moments in the theater when I felt as if someone had ripped the scales from my eyes. It was 1965 in Berkeley, Calif., and the play was called *A Minstrel Show, or Civil Rights in a Cracker Barrel* by Saul Landau and R.G. Davis.

I had been a civil rights worker for several years, first in Harlem and then, the previous summer, in Louisiana, and had just finished my one and only year of graduate study, majoring in the Free Speech Movement. I went primed for an evening of lively entertainment peppered with liberal attitudes, a bit leery of the very idea of something so degrading historically as a minstrel show. Nothing I had ever seen before prepared me for what I saw that night.

The show started out in standard minstrel format. There was the tall white Interlocutor, the master of ceremonies displaying the antics of his stereotypical buffoons—six performers in exaggerated black-face (three blacks and three whites; which was which was never revealed). There were the typical banter, corny jokes, cake-walks and “darkie” songs.

And slowly, bit by bit, there was an air of tension emerging that suddenly erupted and blew the lid off the whole proceedings. The play went well beyond cheering on the liberal, anti-segregation attitudes of its Northern audiences. It was a radical look at the roots of racism and raised issues that people involved in the Civil Rights movement were only beginning to

Silber first saw the San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1973 in Madison, Wisc., where he was filming his award-winning *The War at Home*. He says he realized at the time that somebody had to do a film about the company and he hoped it would be him. Other films and television documentaries came first, however—shows about El Salvador and Nicaragua.

He next saw the Mime Troupe in 1983 with his wife and partner Claudia Vianello and she shared his enthusiasm. *Troupers*, their documentary on the Mime Troupe, premiered October 3 at the Castro Theater in San Francisco and moved to the York in the same city for a week. It opens in Los Angeles November 14, with future showings in other cities somewhat dependent on its success in those venues.

Mixing Techniques

As Silber points out, *Troupers* mixes several different documentary techniques: *cinéma vérité*, using a lot of footage of the Troupe in rehearsal, collective meetings, on tour, plus live interviews with current and former members; historical compilation, drawing on earlier films (*Have You Heard of the San Francisco Mime Troupe?*, Robert Nelson's *Plastic Haircut*) and rare footage of events in the '60s that set the scene for the Troupe; and actual performance sequences that give some sense of the Troupe at their best.

What emerges from this mix is a remarkable composite portrait of what the subtitle somewhat grandiloquently, if not entirely inaccurately, identifies as “the most outspoken theater company in America.”

Silber and Vianello manage to

ART»ENTERTAINMENT



“Dictators” Mobutu (Audrey Smith), Marcos (Melecio Magdaluyo) and Pinochet (Dan Chumley) perform in a scene from *Troupers*.

Coyote, Peter Berg, Judy Rosenberg and rock promoter Bill Graham. Given the strictures of an hour-and-a-half commercial film, much of this historical material remains regrettably sketchy, however, especially in tracing the Troupe's place in the history of American theater.

mance style in which broad physical characterizations are meant to communicate as much to the audience as the words of the script—a style uniquely suited to the Mime Troupe's long tradition of outdoor performances.

It wasn't until 1963 that the company, having severed its ties to the Actors Workshop, took its current name. Within a few short years, the San Francisco Mime Troupe was a sprawling, chaotic organization of some 60 to 80 members, a remarkably prolific source of experimental and politically engaged theater pieces. Some, like the *Minstrel Show*, were superb pieces, years ahead of their time. Others were embarrassingly inept, even in retrospect.

The Troupe was everywhere: producing shows indoors and in the parks, working up special skits for demonstrations, children's puppet plays, street theater, benefits—both for political organizations and for itself—taking shows on the road and getting busted everywhere from San Francisco to Denver and Calgary in Canada.

Missing pieces

Some sense of those tumultuous years comes across in *Troupers*, but a great deal is missing. We get a taste of the Troupe's experimental side in the film clips from *Plastic Haircut*, and a fair helping of its political thrust in the '60s through some highly-charged scenes from the *Minstrel Show* and footage of Troupe members engaged in a 1967 demonstration against Dow recruiters on a Midwestern campus.

We also see how the Troupe's need for bail money, stemming from political arrests, led to the creation of the psychedelic light show rock concerts that became a hallmark of San Francisco's counterculture in the '60s. This, in turn, led to a highly profitable career for the Troupe's former business manager, Bill Graham. What is missing from this picture, however, is a sense of the Troupe's seminal importance in the development of radical theater in America.

Along with the Bread and Puppet Theater in New York, the San

Francisco Mime Troupe was in the vanguard of a movement to demystify theater as “high culture” and take it to the streets, back to the people. This movement also sought to shake off the legacy of McCarthyism which, in the '50s, had succeeded in making American theater less likely to grapple with real social or political issues than almost any other theater in the world.

The Mime Troupe itself spawned, directly and indirectly, a host of other agitprop, alternative and politically engaged companies, as well as sparking a general return to broad, physically-based performance techniques. Among its offspring may be counted such influential groups as the Dell'Arte Players, the Pickle Family Circus and its many offspring, the feminist company Lilith and El Teatro Campesino, which sired the entire Chicano teatro movement.

The Mime Troupe even spun off its own political group, the anarchist Diggers, founded by Peter Berg, Judy Rosenberg and Emmett Grogan. This group began as an internal company faction and became an important political force in San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury scene, feeding and housing the hordes of runaways who flocked there, providing a political alternative to “flower power,” and staging demonstrations against capitalist exploitation, hip and straight alike.

More important, *Troupers* also fails to come to grips with the Mime Troupe as a political theater company. We are shown the political stances taken in the excerpts from company productions, but we are not shown the political process by which these positions are decided.

There is also, perhaps by accident of cutting, what appears to be a bit of historical misinformation in the film. R.G. Davis and the Mime Troupe parted company in 1970. The split was a bitter one, exacerbated by personality conflicts and divided loyalties, but was centered around issues of democratic collectivism. Davis' efforts to mold a radical theater company had proven too successful for its politicized workers to submit any longer to his autocratic

Troupers shows San Francisco Mime Troupe at its best.

rule (for the past 15 years the company has been a worker-controlled collective, about half male, half female, approximately one-third each black, white and Latino).

A cut from the account of Davis' departure to the Troupe's next show, *The Independent Female*, gives a strong impression that the move to oust Davis was a feminist revolt—an impression that would be strongly denied by both parties and that distracts from the real political issues in question.

Despite its shortcomings, *Troupers* delivers an important message loud and clear: that it is possible, however great the odds, for cultural workers to create socially and politically meaningful art, and that there is an audience for such work. It's a message that needs to be heard.

Robert Hurwitt is associate editor of the *East Bay Express*.

Troupers is available from Icarus Films, 200 Park Ave. South, Rm. 1319, New York, NY 10003, (212) 674-3375.

DOCUMENTARY

Still miming for the cause



air in public: integration versus assimilation, the role of whites in the movement's leadership, class issues between working-class blacks and middle-class “Negroes,” even—in its most controversial and shocking scene—issues of racism and sexism in an interracial one-night stand.

Less than a year later I was a member of the Mime Troupe, working in the office, understudying two roles in the *Minstrel Show*, directing workshop productions, acting in that summer's free show in the parks.

Documentary filmmaker Glenn

convey not only the vitality, polish and political punch of the Troupe's best work, but also the dedication and the sheer sweat that goes into that work. The film brings to life some of the personalities that make up the collective and reveals some of the divisions, personal and political, that shake, shape and ultimately energize the collective's work.

The filmmakers also manage to some extent to place the Troupe's work within its own now 26-year-old continuum, both through the historical footage and interviews with former Mime Troupers Peter

Sharon Lockwood (left), Wilma Bonet and Audrey Smith perform a skit from the play *Steeltown* in the documentary *Troupers*.

For the record, the San Francisco Mime Troupe was founded pretty much single-handedly by R.G. Davis in 1959 as the R.G. Davis Mime Studio and Troupe, an experimental wing of the influential Actors Workshop. Though Davis himself was a classically trained mime, the Troupe has generally eschewed the practice of the silent art of pantomime. The “Mime” in the company's name refers rather to a perfor-