

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-



# France

Continued from page 7

New Zealand, among other things—than previous versions. The newspaper was using its prestige to tell Mitterrand how to run his crisis. For a couple of days there, policy was made on the pages of *Le Monde*.

Perhaps the apex of this exploit was the front-page essay entitled "Defeat is an Orphan" (quoting J.F. Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs) by *Le Monde's* director André Fontaine, offering Mitterrand sage counsel in *realpolitik*. The whole business would have been no more than a *bavure* (snafu) if the government hadn't dawdled, he wrote. "For finally, at the risk of shocking some people, it is necessary to insist on the point that the attack against the *Rainbow Warrior* did not go noticeably beyond what is, alas! current practice of the secret services of the most democratic countries." All precautions had been taken to sink the boat without killing anyone, and the death of the Portuguese photographer was an unforeseen accident. "It would have been so much easier if one had agreed to kill deliberately, to destroy the boat at sea: out of sight and unknown. Thank God, this wasn't done!

"One can, of course, in the name of a passably angelic conception of politics, reject the very principle of an operation of this type and suppress the DGSE Action service: it has no other purpose. But in that case this reasoning must be carried through to its logical conclusion, and no longer resign ourselves to letting sales of arms, destined to kill by definition, constitute one of

the most flourishing activities of the French economy."

Fontaine didn't have to say more about how unthinkable such a conclusion would be. Incidentally, the prevailing cynicism is illustrated by the new frequency in the political vocabulary of the words "angelic" or "angelism"—a psychological term defined as an "abnormal desire to escape from the conditions of bodily existence"—to stigmatize any demand for ethical or humanitarian standards in politics.

Mitterrand could be reproached for procrastination, Fontaine wrote, but not for "criminal intent, or else every chief of state or almost would be, at one moment or another, a criminal. There was a *bavure*...."

"What would be dramatic," concluded Fontaine, getting around to serious matters, would be to let a "fiasco be turned into a crime" and thereby undermine either the fine feeling existing today between the country and the army or put into question the "fundamental consensus" on nuclear arms policy.

No one in sight is questioning that consensus.

Tough Foreign Legion veteran General René Imbot took over the DGSE. As army chief of staff, Imbot recently organized France's version of the rapid deployment force, the *Force d'Action Rapide*. Having spent a year at the U.S. Command Staff College at Fort Leavenworth and three years as French liaison officer at the NATO nuclear planning group in Heidelberg, Imbot is undoubtedly a key officer in integrating French forces into U.S. global strategy.

After only two days at his new job, the

general went on TV to announce that he had discovered "a veritable malicious operation of destabilization, even destruction of our secret services" inside the DGSE. He said he had already "cut off the rotten branches" and put together a solid team that would go forward to protect France's role as one of the five nuclear great powers in the world. Any further press reports claiming to emanate from DGSE sources would be "lies," he declared, as he had "bolted this service shut."

That was that. But Imbot's strangely suc-

inct "revelation" about a stupefying destabilization operation inside the DGSE could only fuel speculation on the right about "foreign powers"—from British intelligence to the KGB—and speculation on the left about right-wing plots to frame Mitterrand. Fabius himself hinted at "sabotage of the sabotage." Many people on the left would rather believe in a right-wing or "Anglo-Saxon" plot—which is not impossible—than in Mitterrand's own direct responsibility—which is even less impossible.

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#### October 19

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#### October 25-26

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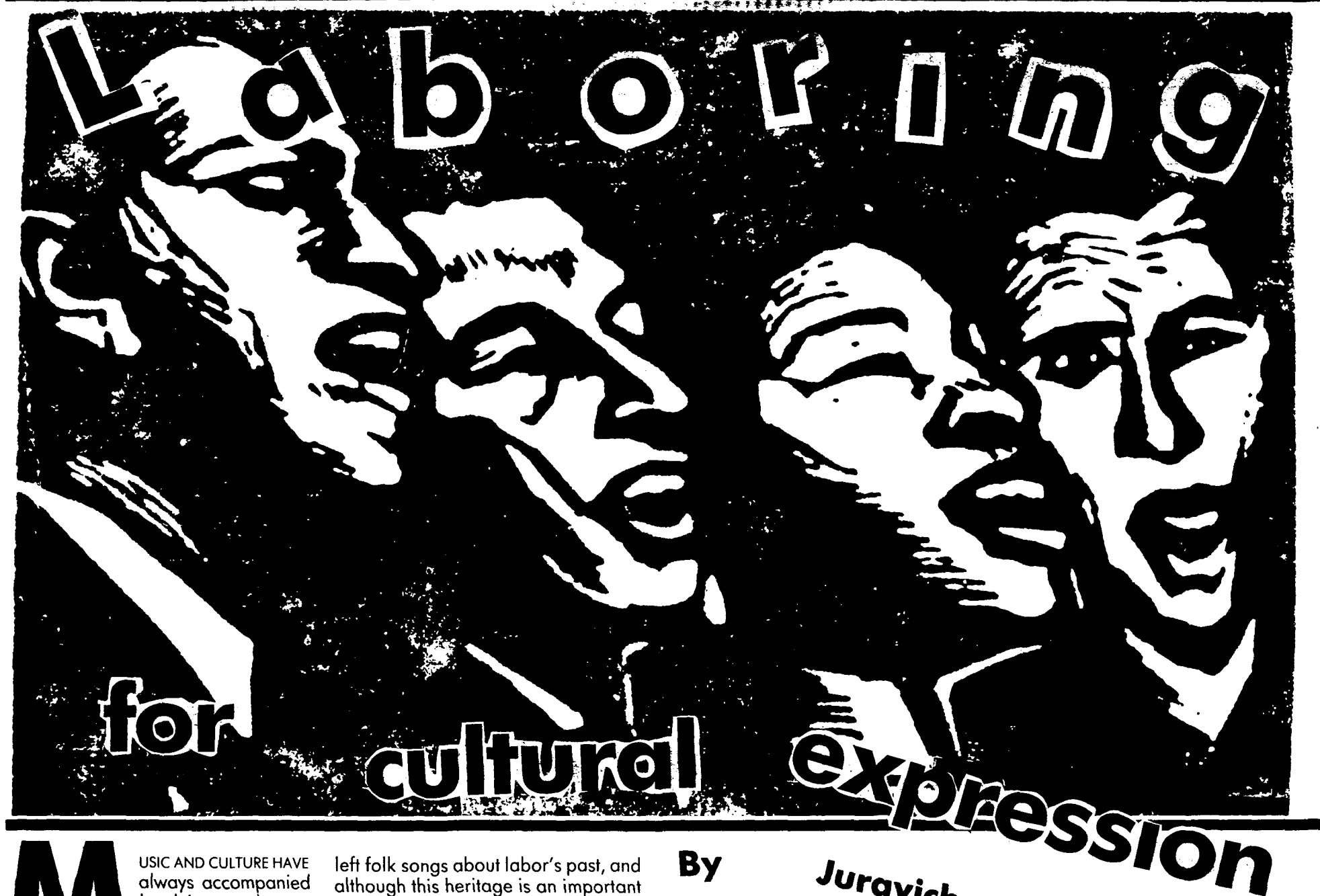
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**M**USIC AND CULTURE HAVE always accompanied hard times and struggle in the labor movement. The struggles of the IWW, the bloody wars in Harlan County and the formation of the CIO spawned the music and working-class culture we have come to associate with the labor movement.

The boom times of the 1950s and 1960s fostered a kind of quiet unionism that seemed more interested in improving the image of unions in middle-class eyes than in expressing working-class culture. The music and cultural artifacts that did express that culture came from outside the labor movement proper, most notably from the civil rights and women's move-

The recent wave of hard times, however, is bringing music of working-class culture back into the labor movement. Unemployed steelworkers like Mike Pickering have been making records to raise money for unemployment projects, women's music has become increasingly interested in working women's themes, and rock singers like Billy Joel and Bruce Springsteen have focused on working-class topics.

This resurgence has also spawned *Talkin' Union*, an independent magazine dedicated to the music, history and folklore of the labor movement. Taking its name from the classic labor ballad written in the 1940s by Almanac Singers, (a group containing Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie) *Talkin' Union's* focus is on labor music.

The magazine grew out of a 1981 gathering of labor singers in Washington, D.C. According to editor Saul Schneiderman, "I invited participants of that event to write down their experiences and when 20 people responded the first issue of the magazine was born."

By the third issue, *TU* settled into a format and style of presentation that has become its norm and its strength: stylistic diversity. *Talkin' Union* could have become merely a publication of

left folk songs about labor's past, and although this heritage is an important part of the magazine's concerns, editor Schneiderman strives hard to integrate the past and present, in addition to presenting a multitude of musical styles.

For example, he uses the voice of Con Carbon, a legendary 19th-century labor singer from the anthracite region of Pennsylvania, to report on current happenings. A recent issue's cover photo and lead story about Bruce Springsteen may have offended some labor music purists, but it is part of Schneiderman's ongoing strategy of diversity. Reports on union singing in South Africa, on Paul Robeson and Latin American folklore remind us of the multi-cultural nature of the labor movement.

Even with this focus on music, *TU* is not only for singers and musicians. Issues often contain essays on labor art in general, as well as occasional pieces on labor history written in an accessible style.

In keeping with its cultural focus, it is also peppered with art, photographs, cartoons and poetry. Most striking are its covers which are always full-page photographs, often historical gems.

Despite the magazine's growing popularity and circulation, it is facing an uphill financial battle. Because it is not officially sponsored by a single union or a group of unions, it relies solely on income from subscriptions. Schneiderman has recently sent out an appeal for funds and hopes that donations and increasing subscriptions will help him keep *Talkin' Union* alive as one of the few sources of working-class culture available today. *Talkin' Union* is available from Box 5349, Takoma Park, MD 20912. Subscriptions are \$7.50 for individuals and \$12.00 for libraries and unions. ■

**Tom Juravich** teaches labor studies at Penn State University, and his album *Rising Again* was produced by the United Auto Workers.

By  
Tom Juravich



***Talkin' Union* is perhaps this country's only magazine dedicated to promoting the music, history and folklore of the labor movement.**