

Seize the Mime



At 50,
the San Francisco Mime Troupe
is still too good to fail

From left, Ed Holmes, BW Gonzalez, Michael Gene Sullivan and Adrian C. Mejia in *Too Big to Fail*.

COURTESY OF SAN FRANCISCO MIME TROUPE

BY ROBERT AVILA

“WOULD YOU LIKE TO HEAR A STORY?” THE SUD-
denly materialized griot (Michael Gene Sullivan) calls out in a hearty West African accent. It’s an invitation that the July 4 crowd, stretching in their hundreds over a sunny sweep of San Francisco’s Dolores Park, has no intention of refusing. They answer the man on the small outdoor stage with gusto—this is their independence day from the multiplex, the boob tube, the boss, Wall Street and Washington, D.C. And with a cheer, the San Francisco Mime Troupe’s 50th anniversary season is underway.

Over five decades the changes in and around the storied Mime Troupe—began in 1959 and operating as a collective since 1970—have been considerable. But these free (donation-driven) summer shows in the park, while a tradition dear to many locals, are not nostalgic undertakings. They still come geared to immediate concerns and evince a commitment to advancing a populist mission of social change. Generally speaking, and to this end, they are also slickly performed and very funny. It’s free theatre in the park, so they have to be.

This social immediacy and professionalism—as well as the collective structure and spirit fostering it—contribute to the Mime Troupe’s enduring relevance as a radical theatre, politically and artistically speaking. This relevance continues even as public consciousness of the “movement” it grew up in, and helped along, increasingly fades into the oblivion of political doublespeak, cultural marketing and postmodern pastiche. But surviving into general appreciation—July 4, 2009, was declared Mime Troupe Day by San Francisco’s board of supervisors—can carry its own risks for a theatre bent on stirring up revolution.

Moreover, lacking the funds necessary to sustain its touring and audience reach at former levels, as well as a wider movement culture of political action and anti-establishment ideas, means that in some ways the Mime Troupe faces a more difficult environment today than that of the free-speech fights, court cases and busts of its turbulent yesteryears.

But first, what about the new show?

The pressing excesses of the system, of course, still abound: imperial war, environmental collapse, political corruption, racism, mass incarceration, epidemic homelessness. Indeed, most of these topics have been subjects of past Mime Troupe work. Nonetheless, the target this year, settled on as always by the consensus of the collective, is, co-writer Ellen Callas tells me, “too big to miss.” The financial meltdown, with its ensuing carve-up of the taxpayer pie in bald “bail-outs” to the villains, has left millions of Americans full of fear and righteous anger. The specter of Great Depression II now hovers over the land like the summer sequel no one wants to see.

Too Big to Fail—penned by head writer Sullivan and smoothly directed by returning Mime Troupe veteran Wilma Bonet, with winks at such varied cultural referents as *The Wizard of Oz*, *Jason and the Argonauts* and *The Lion King*—confronts the brutality of the financial system and the present crisis with sharp and subversive laughter. Set over percolating African-inflected grooves and five biting songs under the direction of musician, composer and lyricist Pat Moran, it looks to bring its audience back to basics.

We are in a small village in some unnamed country, where newlyweds Jeneeba (Velina Brown) and Filije (Adrian Mejia)

are about to embark on life together with their sweet goat (an adorably cud-chewing Lisa Hori-Garcia), the latter a dowry supplied by Jeneeba's father, the vain but good-natured chief of the village (Ed Holmes).

All rapidly goes ill when the decent but "impatient" Filije uses the goat as collateral for a line of credit from an old woman (BW Gonzalez) with a palpable voodoo vibe and dollar signs on her face. Sensible Jeneeba (whom our narrator admits has a reputation for "pooping on everybody's parade") is appalled, but it is too late. Filije embarks on an epic quest to cancel their debt, a journey taking him to an emerald-green city, where everything is privatized and the brown air only looks beautiful through the "money-colored" goggles everyone by law must wear.

Filije finally makes his way to the financial nerve center, and meets a notorious "demon" (Holmes), who sets Filije straight about "magic spells" and other hobgoblins of the so-called free market—"You did it to yourself," he tells him, "there are no magic spells"—while tempting him to the dark side with a vision of inescapable, insatiable human greed. Back home, meanwhile, Jeneeba fights



The San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1972.

the expanding hold of consumer culture over the lives of her fellow villagers, only to find herself cast as an unbelieving witch, and tied to a stake, when the market crashes.

SIGNIFICANTLY, BEFORE LAUNCHING into the story proper, our storyteller warms up the crowd—and sets the political tone—

with a couple of quickies, beginning with the tale of a boy (Hori-Garcia) who finds a gold coin while digging a well. In his enthusiasm he finds two more, and then, sure he will be rich the deeper he digs, is never heard from again. "Would you like to hear another story?" coaxes our friendly, mischievous griot, in the most charming manner. "Don't be shy!

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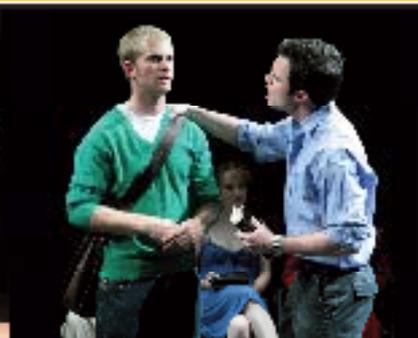
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Remember, we are all in this together, and together is how we will get out!"

That's enough to have the crowd shout approvingly for the next tale, this one concerning a lion (Holmes) who convinces a community of animals he alone can save them from impending disaster. The griot leads the audience in the cry of the hapless animals: "Save us! For we cannot save ourselves!" The lion soon grows fat off their sacrifices, as they grow lean and hungry, until a quick-thinking monkey (Mejia) lined up for sacrifice suggests they eat the lion instead, sharing the meat and using his bones to fertilize the land. "Who is more important," asks the monkey, "the king or the people?" The crowd, naturally, answers on cue. "So. Shall we eat the king?" The crowd roars hungrily in the affirmative.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you the name of the lion," adds the storyteller with deadpan cheek. "Citibank." The audience is again audibly pleased, as the griot admits with equal innocence, "It's a strange name for a lion."

Too Big to Fail's pungent satire thus builds cleverly around the abiding "folk wisdom" contained in the wandering bard's travel-bag of stories, a dramatic strategy that



COURTESY OF SAN FRANCISCO MIME TROUPE

Ed Holmes, Adrian C. Mejia and Michael Gene Sullivan in *Too Big to Fail*.

allows Sullivan's griot full rein to elaborate on a scene, interject criticism and underline a moral—a latitude similar to that found in the commedia forms famously exploited by the troupe in the 1960s under founder RG Davis. The play, meanwhile, excoriates a system of debt peonage, which links easy and usurious credit for wage-depressed working people to

a larger system of wage slavery and renegade finance capitalism.

But it also lambastes the self-deception that has small fish, like Filije, relinquishing personal responsibility as they give in to media-fed dreams of riding high and eating well in the mammoth maw of corporate and Wall Street behemoths. "Biggest fishes' wishes always will prevail," goes the tripping, funky refrain of the title song. "Corporations grow so much they're just too big to fail."

Just to drive the point home, our bard steps in once again to address us directly, now in angry and mocking verses aimed at reminding his audience who they really are:

The Dream of riches! The system only works as long as the working class buys it.
It is why the rich can bankrupt your country, and you all keep so quiet!
They close your factories, steal your money, and still you don't riot!
Oh, you talk of revolution, but you'll never try it.
They tell you, "You're not workers, no. You're in the 'middle' class."
Middle class is just a worker with a big debt, frightened into kissing the boss's ass.
Spellbound by luxuries as your lives go from bad to worse.
Buying into capitalism is the working class's curse.

It's bracing stuff this 4th of July afternoon. The audience seems primed for the show's final call, voiced by Jeneeba: a popular payment strike against the debilitating

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J.B. by Archibald MacLain, December 2007. Photograph by Peter Smith Photographs.

interest charged by the credit card companies and banks. The lion has been fed enough; time the people fed themselves.

THESE ARE HARD TIMES ALL OVER, but radical theatre bears an extra burden. The Mime Troupe certainly knows about economic uncertainty. Ellen Callas points to the rising costs of Bay Area living as undermining the ability of members to engage in the day-to-day business of the collective, as members scramble for outside work to make up growing income gaps. And although the 10-member collective is fortunate in having long ago bought its own building and headquarters in San Francisco's Mission District—as well as in attracting a host of dedicated interns and volunteers—the general drying up of arts funding has forced it to drastically reduce its touring, once a major part of its season. Formerly national and international in its reach, the troupe, whose mission calls for reaching the broadest possible audience, currently confines itself to a round of Northern and Central Californian venues. (*Too Big to Fail* continues performances this month in San Francisco as well as traveling to Oakland,

Hayward, Chico, Davis, Sacramento, Sebastopol, Sonoma, Petaluma, San Luis Obispo and Nevada City.)

In this context, the usual and all-too-easy dismissal of politically pointed theatre as “preaching to the converted” seems especially baseless. Audiences at Dolores Park and elsewhere are in need of the alternative points of view provided and pushed for by the Mime Troupe. As Ed Holmes puts it, “The choir needs to be preached to. It needs to feel its mass.”

The Mime Troupe's anniversary year is an impressive achievement by any measure, and it invites constructive consideration of the company's continuing political and artistic relevance, and, by association, the health of “political theatre” in the U.S. The troupe itself is hosting retrospective exhibitions and events over the next several months.

Maybe the time will prove ripe for the kind of agitation the Mime Troupe employs, as the consequences of a highly exploitative system continue to pile up. But its call in *Too Big to Fail* for a mass economic strike, for example, however sensible or productive it may be deemed in the abstract, can only carry

weight if it is able to connect somehow to organized and widespread action. And carrying such weight means also bearing the brunt of the establishment's discontent. Moreover, the Mime Troupe's political analysis here is arguably not as thorough as the history of its own productions might lead one to expect: *Steeltown*, for example—a big success on the troupe's tours in the mid-1980s, as factories were closing across the country—illustrated how decades of class warfare have left wage- and benefit-impooverished Americans ever more dependent on credit cards for daily survival, not just luxury goods or an irresponsible addiction to the good life.

But anyway you slice it, this brand of radical theatre walks a tightrope in today's environment. And that balancing act is one all concerned with art as a vehicle for social change will want to keep an eye on. ☒

Robert Avila is the senior theatre critic for the San Francisco Bay Guardian and the recipient of a grant from American Theatre's Bay Area Commissioning Fund, supported by the Hewlett Foundation.

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Julio Gonzalez's 'The Shipper of Wrath' (adapted by Frank Galati) (photo by Susan Cook)

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