

'Bohemian' play sets up camp

By David Armstrong
EXAMINER STAFF CRITIC

IF THE SAN Francisco Mime Troupe staged a gay version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," it might come out something like Gary Aylesworth's new play, "The Bohemian Grove," which premiered Friday at the Capp Street Playhouse.

Aylesworth — who wrote, directed and co-stars with Peter Newton — mixes faeries and fairies, magic and muckraking, satire and fantasy, to produce this lengthy but likable farcé.

The Bohemian Grove of the title is the Bohemian Grove in Sonoma County, where the rich and powerful meet every summer for supposedly non-political socializing and choreographed high jinks around the campfire. After more than a century, the gatherings remain steadfastly all-male.

That fact gives Aylesworth his premise: that repressed homoeroticism plays a much larger part in the frolicking among the redwoods than any of the august members would willingly admit.

Basing his tale on Ron Bluestein's journalistic account of his tenure at the grove as a waiter, Aylesworth spins a scenario that he dubs "a documentary fantasy." The result gives new meaning to the term "camping out."

Aylesworth, playing Ron, a gay waiter, has a flirtatious interlude with a macho Stanford law student after a nature spirit sprinkles fairy dust in his eyes. The macho guy discovers long-buried gay feelings from his boyhood and finds himself entranced by Ron's eyes.

More imaginatively — and here Aylesworth really gets cheeky — Ron is pursued by George Shultz, our real-life secretary of State. "Shultz" plays a recorder with a sweetly benign air when he's not talking and laughing like Elmer Fudd and making a fool of himself.

Other real-life people make appearances in this ambitious, two-man production, including Caspar Weinberger, Stephen Bechtel Jr.



Peter Newton and Gary Aylesworth in 'The Bohemian Grove'

Theater review

'The Bohemian Grove'

By Gary Aylesworth

Director: Gary Aylesworth

Cast: Gary Aylesworth, Peter Newton

Evaluation: ★ ★ ★

and Herbert Hoover, who gives a posthumous speech extolling utopian communism.

Aylesworth, who plays Hoover and 13 other characters, gives an intensely physical performance, changing character with ease and adroitly manipulating the few props. A twist of a headband here, and he's a nature spirit. A change in voice there, and he's Ron, the waiter — out of place and out of sorts, "dyspeptic," as he puts it.

Newton, who plays nine parts and wrote the music, is equally ver-

satile and intense. His Shultz is extremely funny, and his transition from a macho dude to an exquisitely self-conscious (and slyly self-promoting) player of wimpy "men's music" is smooth.

Anything this far-reaching is bound to sag in spots, though, and "The Bohemian Grove" is no exception. At 90 minutes without an intermission, the play is more of an endurance test for the audience than it should be.

Some of Aylesworth's acting, too, is overdone. As Ron, he grimaces and complains of dyspepsia rather too often. Moreover, the many songs and skits that Aylesworth drew from books about Bohemian Grove sound very much alike after a while.

"The Bohemian Grove" continues on Fridays and Saturdays through Sept. 13 at the Capp Street Playhouse, 362 Capp St.