

# 'Dept. of Fire' is a hot topic

By Dennis Harvey  
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The subject is hot — but the drama smoke-choked — in "Department of Fire," a new documentary fantasy by San Francisco playwright Gary Aylesworth and his Construction Crew Theatre.

There's an undeniable fascination and topicality to what Aylesworth is attempting here: nothing less than a historical overview of the social/psychological roots of racism in the S.F. Fire Department that finally erupted in a series of scandals in the '80s.

## CONCERT PREVIEW

Far from resolved even now, the department's internal woes would seem more provocative stage material than ever. In the wake of the tragic Oakland-Berkeley Hills fire, it's chilling to see how the emergency workers with whom we trust our lives can be at least as distracted and blinded by good old boy prejudice as anyone else. If they can't "keep house" themselves, how can they be counted on to keep a cool head when it comes to saving our own? Or is it unfair to expect working-class men in dangerous and unenviable jobs to instantly accommodate society's shifting mores.

Aylesworth is a promising and steadily improving local talent with a very distinctive approach to both text and staging. He's certainly tackled complicated subjects before: California pop spirituality in "I Was a Go-Go Dancer for Gurdjieff," the right-



'Department of Fire' features Andrea Brembry, left, Mitzie Abe, Gary Aylesworth, Peter Newton and Catherine Conway at the New Performance Gallery in San Francisco.

wing political fraternity in "The Bohemian Grove," children's advocacy and the Holocaust in last year's excellent "The Orphan King."

But Aylesworth hyperactive approach can often be his undoing. Its 90 minutes is a punishingly energetic — and fatiguing — mix of wordplay, flashbacks, dance and music, "Department of Fire" substitutes cleverness

for coherency at every turn. It would tell us much more if it tried to say a lot less.

The framing device is that of fictive Captain Johnny McAdoo (Aylesworth, who like the four other actors plays a number of roles), who is turned away at the gates of Heaven by St. Peter. The gruff, if well-meaning McAdoo must review a critical stretch of his life on earth and

recognize his faults or else spend a few eternities in purgatory.

This leads us to a slapstick-laden, frenzied view of the fire department in the 1960s. During this troubled era, the civil rights movement, Fillmore neighborhood strife and forced integration of minority personnel into theretofore all-white units rocked the department's old boy foundations.

We get a lot of very broadly drawn (and eventually tedious) scenes in which whiskey-guzzling, cabbage-eating Irish American firefighters trade ribald jokes and racist badinage oblivious to their lack of cultural understanding.

But Aylesworth's stereotyping of the firefighters doesn't give us real insight into the seeds of such racism — just its ugly surface. Attempting to broaden the scope he throws in any number of flashbacks-within-flashbacks. We glimpse eccentric characters from San Francisco's Barbary Coast past, including "California's Mother of Civil Rights," the mysterious Mary Ellen Pleasant (Andrea Brembry).

But the performers (including Mitzie Abe, Catherine Conway and musician Peter Newton) are so busy keeping up with the often-needless choreographic and musical chores co-directors Aylesworth and Carol Chaddick have devised that there's no energy left over to develop characterizations.

The result is a somewhat grating whirl that buries its intended satire in an avalanche of information and sweat. Since Aylesworth's style is busy in the extreme, clarity is of the utmost importance. But "Department of Fire" is often infuriatingly hard to follow, it sacrifices everything (including finally our patience) to the frenzy.

"Department of Fire" continues Thursday-Saturday at 8:30 p.m. through Dec. 14 at the New Performance Gallery, 3153 17th St., in San Francisco's Mission District. Tickets are \$10-12. Call 641-4454 for more information.