

Satire about Witnesses is dipped in acid

By Scott Rosenberg

EXAMINER THEATER CRITIC

IT WAS T.S. Eliot who first identified and made use of the apocalyptic ring of the English publican's traditional closing-up shout, "Hurry up please — it's time." But Gary Aylesworth must be the first artist to envision Armageddon as last call for alehouse earth.

Near the end of his new play, "The Doom Folk," Aylesworth comes out in the manner of a crusty bar-keep sweeping an invisible broom and mutters, "The world is ending, the world is closed, I want to go home." He's like an exhausted God the Tapster, shoeing out his earthly customers while eerie chimes toll a distant march.

Aylesworth's mostly solo piece, subtitled "Millions Now Living Will Never Die" (it opened last weekend at the New Performance Gallery), examines the millenarian beliefs of the Jehovah's Witnesses — satirizing what the playwright sees as their banality and passivity.

The central character (presumably Aylesworth himself) tracks down his mother, who had given him up for adoption at birth, and discovers she's a Witness. She mails him some Watchtowers (the faith's ubiquitous publication), and he does some research, deciding that the Witnesses' brand of fundamentalism is racist, sexist and authoritarian. (Tibetan Buddhism seems more his speed.)

Aylesworth performs in a high-strung style, talking, chanting and humming, chattering through both sides of phone conversations, changing from one character to another with a flip of a striped sheet, playing not just himself and his mother but improbably named angels and figures from Jehovah's Witness history as well. Peter Newton's musical accompaniment (on keyboard and percussion) helps maintain the frenetic pace for the piece's 90 minutes.

At times, Aylesworth comes off as a one-man desecration squad, mocking the Witnesses with the same



THEATER REVIEW

'The Doom Folk'

By Gary Aylesworth

Director: Aylesworth

Cast: Aylesworth, Peter Newton

Theater: New Performance Gallery, Thursday through Saturday through Oct. 31 (863-9834)

Evaluation: ★ ★ ★

Gary Aylesworth above, and Peter Newton of 'Doom Folk'

edge of horrified sarcasm Christopher Durang turned on the Vatican in "Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You." When Aylesworth tells Mom, "I don't think the Witnesses have a lock on the truth," she snaps, "Oh, you're prejudiced, huh?"

This can be both hilarious and a little uncomfortable to watch, since Aylesworth, unlike Durang, did not begin—as an insider in the religion he's putting down. The ridicule he directs, at the Book of Revelation, for example, feels a little too glib: One doesn't have to be a fundamentalist to find this spiritual and poetic document more than just a ludicrous rant about "the whore of Babylon" and the seven seals.

But Aylesworth's chief point, one that comes across in "The Doom Folk" with warmth and clarity, is that the Witnesses' belief that the end is near, and the behavior they base on it, can cause considerable pain to others who don't share it. Aylesworth plies his mother with letters and calls and she keeps withdrawing — why form earthly ties when heaven is nigh?

"The Doom Folk" balances satire and sympathetic understanding best in its secondary story, a kind of parallel subplot based on the autobiography of Raymond Franz — a lifelong Witness whose doubts about the group gradually lead him to cowed but persistent dissent, causing him to be "disfellowshipped."

Portraying Franz as a missionary peddling the Witness gospel to islanders who can't follow his English, and as a bureaucrat desperately trying to solve the problems of the faithful by referring to chapter and verse, Aylesworth creates a moving image of a devout wimp ground up and spat out by a religious hierarchy.

Elsewhere there are miscalculations and imbalances in the rapid-fire style Aylesworth has developed on his own in his many original pieces, most recently "The Bohemian Grove." He seems to find bad puns and silly jokes irresistible (a reference to the "Old Testicle," a quick glance at his watch after mentioning "Ecclesiastes 9:15"). He also indulges on occasion in New Age psychobabble ("All I'm really trying to do is incarnate the heart").

A good director might help clean up some of these self-indulgences. It's a shame for anything to obscure Aylesworth's ample talent both as a clever writer and a versatile performer. And at its best moments — imagining an imprisoned Christ crooning a gospel duet with himself or picturing a heaven in which Esperanto is the official language — "Doom Folk" needs no editing. It's religious satire with a sharp eye and a fast-beating heart.

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