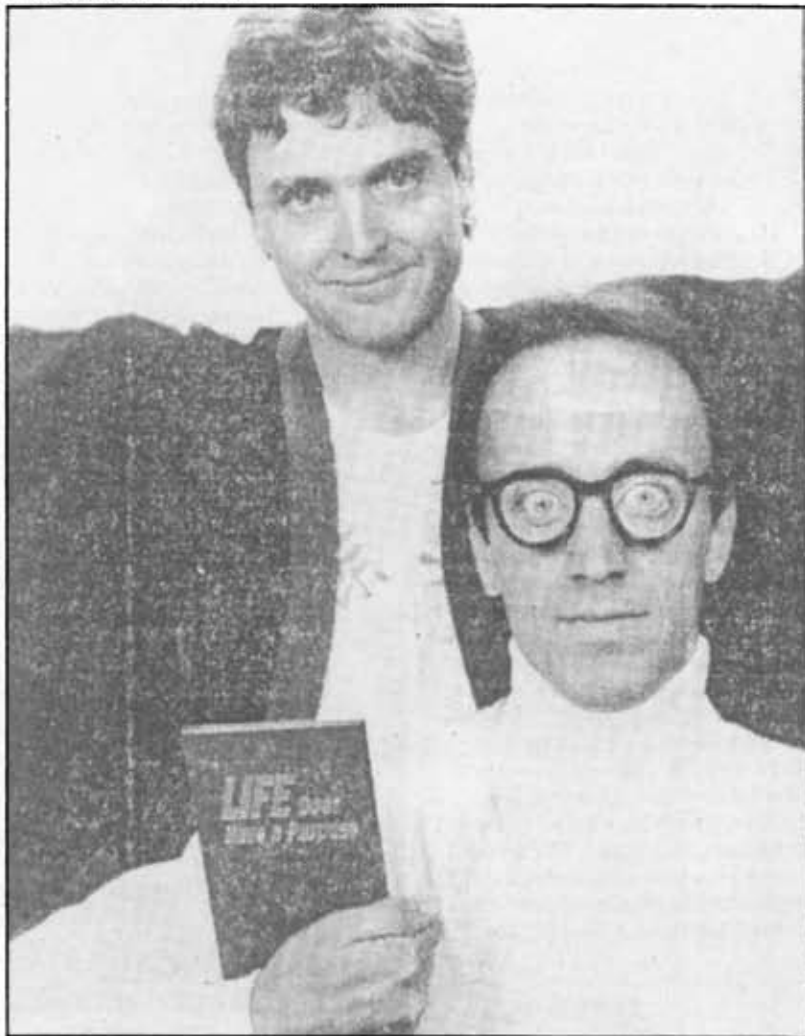


CITY Arts



Review/'Doom Folk'

Ensemble work at its best

Gary Aylesworth (above) and Peter Newton in "The Doom Folk: Millions Now Living Will Never Die," at the New Performance Gallery in San Francisco through Oct. 31.

By **ROBERT WILLDEN**
Theater Critic

An adopted son's search for his birth mother leads him to an examination of apocalyptic thought patterns — those of the Jehovah's Witnesses, in particular. Along the way we hear the pathetic story of Raymond and get inside the heads of the cataclysmically devout.

The brilliant Gary Aylesworth presents his 11th full-length play, "The Doom Folk (or Millions Now Living Will Never Die)." This solo piece, performed and directed by the author, plays through Oct. 31 at the New Performance Gallery.

Aylesworth is assisted by the music and special effects of Peter Newton — "and his Taiko Gamelan Arkestra." These two are tight, ensemble work at its best.

When the adopted son locates his birth mother, Ruth, he finds out that she is a Jehovah's Witness (her knee-jerk response to mention of the Catholic Church is "whore of Babylon"). She is also a homophobe: "My religious convictions would prohibit even tolerance."

He has a debate with his guardian angel, Mashed Potatoes, who advises that it is man's role "to fash-ion stars out of dog dung." He struggles against his prejudices and decides to

accept his mother, religion and all.

They communicate by phone and letter. After a time, the son realizes that he's the only one initiating things — his mother is withdrawing from him.

He realizes the irony of the situation; he tracks down Ruth out of his need for a profound emotional connection, only to find her involved with an organization that is "the official sponsor of the end of the world".

The story is unusual — bizarre by sitcom standards, but by no means the soap opera our protagonist worries it will become; summarizing can't do it or the performance justice. "Doom Folk" is moving, comic, profound, and poignant. This is largely the result of Aylesworth's wonderful characters — e.g., his haunted, shrill-voiced Raymond Franz, trying to sell religion door to door in Puerto Rico. Or there is his portrait of Raymond's angels, warring within him.

The frenetic Aylesworth, talking double-time, Federal Express style, plays all the roles and is wonderful. He slides from the desperate son to the crisp, matter-of-fact mother effortlessly. After the show, you'd swear you'd seen seven or eight different actors. Though he can wear you out and demands your attention and involvement, his is fine performance art, period.