

Love in the Haight puts on a G-string

'Go-Go Dancer' bares brisk comic sense for the '60s

By Robert Hurwitt
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

FEW LOCAL playwrights have put as much time and energy into probing San Francisco history — and legend — as Gary Aylesworth has. Since he arrived here in 1982, he's been busy creating comic musical dramas about everything from the powerful Bohemian Club ("The Bohemian Grove") to the Beats ("Kerouac-i.e.!") and the novelist Barnaby Conrad ("The Matador Club").

Each of what Aylesworth calls his "documentary fantasies" blends historical research with irreverent lampoon. Each has also featured a large cast of characters, all played by Aylesworth and his partner, Peter Newton.

This time Aylesworth turns to some of the seamier sides of the high hippie days of the '60s. "I Was a Go-Go Dancer for Gurdjieff" — which opened Friday at the New Performance Gallery — is a richly comic, fast-paced spiritual quest that takes its seeker into the worlds of cults and pornography. And this time Aylesworth has broadened his acting ensemble, with the addition of Harriet Schiffer in the title role.

Schiffer proves to be an excellent choice, an actress whose comic sensibilities and protean versatility

mesh nicely with Aylesworth's own strengths as a performer. The two work on the same high-energy level — ably supported by Newton in several minor roles, as well on keyboard and guitar — and both work with an engaging openness that overcomes many of the script's weaknesses.

"Go-Go Dancer," partially based on a true story, takes place in a Haight-Ashbury just coming down from the Summer of Love. Paranoia about the Mafia moving in on independent drug dealers is rife; burnouts who tuned in and dropped out are trying to "crawl back"; pushers are administering heavy doses to innocent beauties and selling their comatose bodies for gang bangs.

Enter Megan Muldoon (Schiffer), a depressed hippie postal worker trying to find herself in the wake of a few too many acid trips. Fellow workers turn her onto their guru, Alex Hornblow (Aylesworth) — a New York actor turned Gurdjieff disciple, who runs a tight, psychologically brutal and economically exploitative cult.

To support her new habit, Megan finds herself working as a topless go-go dancer, porno film actress and B-girl in an after-hours joint. Her descent into sleaze mirrors her personal degradation in Alex's patriarchal cult.

Serious as it sounds — and Aylesworth provides plenty of food for thought about misogynist, homophobic and other abusive traits in Gurdjieff's ideas, as well as in American culture — it's remarkably funny stuff. Played at breakneck speed, as a combination docu-comedy and Howdy Doody-Gurdjieff revue, it becomes a whirlwind tour through philosophical concepts and snapshot caricatures from the late '60s.

Some of the material in the 80-minute show feels a bit extraneous — it's hard to understand what an extended lampoon of Tennessee



Peter Newton, left, Harriet Schiffer and Gary Aylesworth in spiritual quest

Williams' "Night of the Iguana" has to do with the story (funny as it is in Schiffer's hands). Some of the material about the cult gets a bit repetitive, just when we feel we'd like the expose to dig a bit deeper.

But the satire is fast, wide-ranging and pointed. Aylesworth's text and Newton's accompaniment is thick with deftly phrased cultural references that delight and jolt the mind. Schiffer's mercurial performance is a roller coaster ride of myopic seeking, bluesy self-doubt, false bravado and Pollyannaish optimism.

And Aylesworth himself is a blur of quick, expert character sketches: pontificating Gurdjieff, charismatic Alex, burnt-out hippies, sleazy porn operators (with Newton as an Igor-like assistant), daffy beggar — even Buffalo Bob and a self-consciously hip Herb Caen. You leave the theater eager to see what this man will do next.

THEATER REVIEW

'I Was a Go-Go Dancer for Gurdjieff'

Playwright: Gary Aylesworth

Directors: Aylesworth, Harriet Schiffer

Cast: Aylesworth, Schiffer, Peter Newton

Theater: New Performance Gallery, through Dec. 3 (863-9834)