

The Matador Club

Talent, Insight,
Wit, Presence,
Pizzazz,
Humor,
& Love

Reviewed by Leland Moss

Reviewing for a monthly publication can be extremely frustrating; often the most exciting theatrical projects have vanished by the time the review gets into print. What point, then, in publishing the piece? All it can do is evoke regret in readers who missed the event. At best the names of those responsible can be trumpeted loudly, so that their next effort will attract maybe one or two readers who remember something good about them.

OK, then. Remember these names: Gary Aylesworth and Peter Newton. Repeat the names aloud now: Gary Aylesworth and Peter Newton. Again: Gary Aylesworth and Peter Newton.

Got it? The next time you see either of these names connected to a theatre project, no matter how offhandedly the project seems to be advertised, stop whatever you're doing and make plans to see their show. These guys have it — talent, wit, insight, presence, pizzazz, humor, and love.

The Matador Club is "based loosely on the novel by ex-San Francisco writer and bistro owner Barnaby Conrad," a name totally unfamiliar to me. Conrad, I gathered from the program and the play, was obsessed with bullfighting, and with the famous torero Manolete in particular. He wrote a novel about and painted portraits of Manolete, one of which hung in Conrad's North Beach club for years.

Peter Newton, one of the two actors in the play, similarly idolized Manolete — and also worked on and off for years as a stand-up comic. Somehow it came to him and his collaborator Aylesworth to juxtapose the life and guiding philosophy of the classic bullfighter with those of a stand-up comic. By twisting history just a tad, they place the annual San Francisco Comedy Competition in Conrad's bistro, the Matador Club, and thereby set the stage for their extraordinary piece.

Switching back and forth from Spain to North Beach as fast as you can switch channels with your remote control, Aylesworth and Newton depict the last days in the lives of Manolete and his fictional counterpart, Cal "Biff" Packotee, "the greatest obscure and failed comedian." We are dazzled by their virtuosity as they bounce from character to character, watching Aylesworth portray Manolete's manager as a prancing macho bull, then Packotee's manager as a slimy, smooth-talking huckster. Or Newton as the faded yet elegant torero, purple cape draped over his shoulder,

then as the freaked-out faded comic, the cape reversed to become a white blanket befitting Linus. The two actors go on and on, producing distinct caricatures who are far more than outlines, till all we can do is watch with mouths agape.

If you had the good fortune to see Joe Chaikin's most successful work with the Open Theatre, or Grotowski's original company on their American tours, you'll have a good sense of the power Aylesworth and his partner Newton can generate on stage. Yet, unlike those earlier experiences, Aylesworth and Newton encourage you to engage your mind as well as your heart. The two actors may not be as physically adept as Chaikin or Grotowski, but their capacity to connect with your intellect more than makes up for an awkward move or two. And while the Open Theatre was out to convert you, these two have a less radical goal. They want to explore some ideas with you, and they illuminate their theses with precision and wit. Theses?? Yes. Underneath their silly slapstick and horrible puns lie quite a few political and philosophical ruminations on such heady topics as masculinity, male-male bonding, sex vs. death, competition vs. cooperation, Hispanic vs. Caucasian sensibilities, the plight of the gay comic in the straight world, and a few other subjects as well.

But, you ask, what in hell do comedy and bullfighting have in common? Good question. According to Aylesworth and Newton, the

rules for both are almost identical, dealing with making a big "kill," retaining one's masculinity at all costs — and only truly succeeding if the goal is, existentially speaking, nothing. While they acknowledge as well as demonstrate the grace and glory possible in both professions, they use their play to deliver more of a warning than a lure. Neither bullfighting nor stand-up comedy promise a life of love and fulfillment, but rather a constant fear of death and competition — one as hideous as the other. Indeed, in reconsidering the subject matter, it's astonishing that the performers have made the play as comic and warm as it is.

Some of their work goes by too fast, and they try to bite off more than they can chew (or we digest) in their short 90 minutes. (The injection of Barnaby Conrad into the play, for example, is quite unnecessary, serving only to make the uninformed feel left out, as if we're missing an important joke. Conrad may have served as an inspiration, but by now he's eminently dispensable.) But like the best Firesign Theatre recordings, *The Matador Club* begs you to listen hard and listen often. And when it's over, you're left with a few good laughs, some pithy thoughts, some dazzling images, and a full heart. How many other theatrical evenings can promise so much? The show, which closed December 29, deserves another chance. Let's hope an enterprising producer takes this hint.