

**WOMAN AS CITIZEN IN SATIRIC MELODRAMA:  
JOAN HOLDEN AND THE  
SAN FRANCISCO MIME TROUPE**

*Donna Jean Zane*

During the 1980's, the San Francisco Mime Troupe's original plays, utilizing the popular elements of satire and Western melodrama, critiqued the conservative rhetoric of the Reagan Administration's policies by articulating common real-life concerns over such issues as unemployment, homelessness, and government corruption. Principal playwright Joan Holden's framing of social actions within the melodrama form allow her plays to be enjoyed by diverse audiences because they contain elements of comedy, romance, and action/adventure. As depicted in most of these plays, female subjugation is an aspect of social injustice. The actions of the female characters in four of Holden's scripts in the 1980's portray women as ordinary citizens in a capitalist, patriarchal society, whose work to instigate social change by organized, cooperative action crosses economic, racial, and class lines and in whose interest the general, human interest is served.



**T**he San Francisco Mime Troupe, one of America's best known and longest running theatres of political comedy, celebrates thirty-five years of existence in 1994. The company has toured across the United States since 1966 and is internationally renowned, having traveled to Europe five times and played in Cuba and Nicaragua.

Throughout its history, the troupe has sought to satirize and comment on the burning issues of the day in a lively and entertaining manner by parodying current events and utilizing melodramatic plots from popular media forms such as television soap operas and sitcoms, westerns, war and spy movies. By employing these popular, as opposed to "high art" genres, the Mime Troupe is able to make the experience of live theatre emotionally accessible to those who would otherwise not go to the theatre. The group makes their theatre physically accessible to those not living in San Francisco, the Troupe's home base, by touring.

Although the San Francisco Mime Troupe abandoned mime early in its history in favor of a modified Commedia dell'Arte model, which in turn gave way to a performance style based on Western melodrama, its name and sense of social purpose have remained the same.

These styles all require the characters to be played broadly in order to be easily recognized. On a practical level, the actors must be seen and heard for the audiences to enjoy the shows.

Since its inception, the Mime Troupe has played outdoors every summer season in the San Francisco parks, relying on after show "pitches" which have performers holding out actual hats for monetary donations.<sup>1</sup> The outdoor performances keep the actors responsive to the audiences. Since their intention is not to create an illusion, but to demonstrate an event, street noises (e.g. barking dogs, church bells, car brakes, etc.) are often incorporated into the performances to show how it is possible to alter the plot, performance, and even everyday existence.

Audiences have come to expect the elements of spectacle, music, and a comic and pertinent political message in all Mime Troupe productions. The company chooses to exploit the power of immediacy that binds spectator to actor inherent in live performance. The power of live performance lies in bringing to life what before the performance could only be imagined. Through the theatre, people can perform and try on "another" existence. As the provisional nature of the exploitative status quo is rediscovered, the audiences (after being engaged in the play performances) are asked to perform a similar role outside the theatre in equitably resolving the conflicts the plays depict. With this understanding of the theatre's power, the Mime Troupe reclaims it as a forum for the disenfranchised.

During the eight years of the Reagan Administration, the Mime Troupe produced sixteen plays. In all of these plays, the characters faced crises, the roots of which were not personal or psychological, but social and economic. The plays also portrayed the 1980's under the Reagan presidency as a possible liminal phase of American life, where people were not only disillusioned with the oppressive economic, political, and social conditions endorsed by the government, but were ready to enact change.

It was and is the Mime Troupe's intention to write and perform plays as correctives to the profiteering mentality of recent times. The motivation behind casting the plays as political comedies with healthy doses of music and laughter rather than tragedies, says company playwright Joan Holden, is that:

Each genre carries a different message and each class knows which message it wants to hear. Tragedy says there is an immutable order which it is idle to resist ... Realism says the game is to the strong, Comedy says you can have what you are being denied.

(Holden 1969: 418)

The San Francisco Mime Troupe plays of the 1980's united the revolutionary forces of comedy with the emotional potency of Western melodrama. The melodrama, with its simple, powerful stories and clear moral tone, became popular in the nineteenth century and was responsible for bringing large audiences into the theatre who were eager to see working class people like themselves portrayed on stage. A typical plot involved a poor hero or heroine who endured a series of threats and hardships perpetuated by a richer or more powerful villain. In the end, however, after various plot reversals, coincidences, masquerades, and escapes, the villain was defeated and the virtuous prevailed for the time being.<sup>2</sup>

In the Mime Troupe productions of the last decade, conventional story patterns were stylized as modern day allegories that articulated common concerns over such issues as unemployment, homelessness, and government corruption. These productions represented in a literal fashion the movement (the changes the "heroic" characters go through) from ignorance and/or apathy to enacting change for social equality and moral justice. The heroes and heroines, however, were often flawed, being "part ridiculous and part noble" at the same time (Holden 1989: 42). In these modern melodramas, the process of changing oneself (and by extension, the world) was often brought about by the discovery of certain facts purposely hidden from public view by a power elite (the villainous characters). Once these facts entered the public domain, control of the social system was no longer limited to the rich and few. People could and wanted to work for social change because of what they (now) knew. The plays thus were intended by the Mime Troupe to incur social and political change by arousing both audience anger at present conditions and audience hope that achieving social justice was possible.

Differing ideas for actions and viewpoints in various scenes of any given play are frequently shared by the Troupe. As a theatre collective, the shows originate collaboratively, but Joan Holden, as playwright in residence, has written or co-written most of the work produced by the Troupe since 1970.

Holden, who earned a master's degree in English from the University of California, Berkeley, was one of the original twelve members of the theatre company when it dedicated itself to collective leadership after the departure of Mime Troupe founder, R.G. Davis, in 1970. The philosophical tone of the plays post-1971 with Holden as principal playwright changed from the pessimism about human nature expressed in most of the *Commedia* shows to one of optimism about justice and social change. Holden later wrote that she chose to explore the fusion of popular forms with political satire because in satire, a "specific evil" is comically addressed and a solution implied and "this is different from presenting a generalized grim version with no exit" (Holden 1979: 104). In her plays of the 1980's, Holden did not profess to a singularly feminist viewpoint. Yet her engagement with "traditionally" female-oriented social issues, among them, health, education, and equality in the workplace and the actions for redress her plays propose — access to

information, collective organization, and confrontation with one's oppressors — place Holden's work within a feminist mold.

While most of her characters (both male and female) appear to be formulaic, Holden's purpose is to criticize the male-defined and controlled culture that creates and perpetuates these stereotypes. On a more mundane level, because Mime Troupe plays are conceived and designed to tour (the group does not have a theatre building of its own), props and set pieces are necessarily kept to a minimum while easily understood and recognized characters keep up audience interest. The key to Holden's works, she has said, begins with an action.

This paper briefly discusses the plot actions and the political actions taken by female characters (both heroic and villainous) in the four Mime Troupe plays of the 1980's that Joan Holden was primarily responsible for: *Americans, or Last Tango in Huahuatenango* (1981), *Steeltown* (1984), *The Mozamgola Caper* (1986), and *Ripped Van Winkle* (1988). Although the plays depict a wide range of women's responses to dominance and objectification, the actions of Holden's heroines reveal her real-life social and political beliefs as cultural activist: woman as citizen whose concerns against an unjust social order sanctioned by capitalist patriarchy cut across economic, racial, and class lines and in whose interest the general, human interest is served.

### ***Americans, or Last Tango in Huahuatenango* (1981): Real World Action**

Joan Holden visited Nicaragua in January 1981, conducting research for what was to become the production of *Americans*. The play follows the events surrounding the Reagan Administration's firing of Robert White, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador. White seemed to endorse the military backed civilian government of El Salvador, but at the same time, denounced the human rights violations committed by its right-wing death squads. White argued that the U.S. policy of supplying the Salvadorian government troops with arms and military advisors would only renew popular support for the rebels. At the time of White's departure, the fourteen-month-old civil war between the military-backed administration and the Marxist-led guerillas had claimed over 20,000 lives.<sup>3</sup>

### **Plot Action of Fictional World**

Important themes are the exploitation of Central America by the United States, the poor by the rich, and women by men.

The San Martin landowners, government, and secret police have conspired with the U.S. government to keep the peasants of the country landless and powerless. Each new land reform minister has promised changes, but has done nothing.

Laura Berman, a photojournalist, arrives in the village of Huahuatenango to do an essay on the guerillas who are attempting to reclaim the land due them. The guerrillas misidentify Berman as Phyllis Wrench and kidnap her in exchange for a ransom to buy arms to defend the occupied land. These weapons are to be supplied by a CIA agent pretending to side with the rebel cause. The San Martin secret police gun down the guerillas and unarmed peasants in an ambush.

Berman smuggles her photographs of the slaughtered villagers out of the country and they are picked up by the American media. The new American Ambassador explains the story away, assuring the American public that the villagers were killed by members of the Frente Popular and that the police had no recourse then, than to kill the guerillas in retaliation. Soon after this incident, the San Martin dictator, Colonel Garcia, is executed by an alliance of villagers and surviving rebels.

### Character Action

Laura Berman is first seen as a trendy American, caught up in a hedonistic, therapeutic lifestyle (she works for "*The Journal of Total Enjoyment*"), who has little understanding of cultures other than her own. For example, after a peasant boy carries her bags and offers her a shoeshine (his means of survival in a strife-torn country), Laura's only response is to hand him a can of Pepsi. Berman's social role as consumer (and by extension, the American public's) compels her to treat the Huahuatenango villagers as fellow "buyers" of U.S. goods and policies. She is totally unprepared for the frenzy of political activity that is taking place as the civil war rages on. Laura has been sent to photograph images of the guerillas for American popular consumption, as if their struggles were part of an exotic tourist attraction. Although once mistaken for Phyllis Wrench in both physical being and spirit, Laura truly begins to exercise free choice and self-determination by finding the courage to film the massacre. Their actions start Laura thinking and questioning her own unequal status in the present power structure and her former complicity in reporting officially sanctioned "news" information.

Phyllis Wrench appears briefly at the beginning and end of the play. She remains a robotic government bureaucrat (the new American Ambassador) who has internalized the paternalism inherent in the military-industrial hierarchy and cares little for the San Martin people.

Rufina is Garcia's mistress and mother of his two children. It appears that she might have once felt some love for Garcia, but later simply satisfies his sexual appetite in order to receive food and a few dollars to live on. Rufina realizes that her relationship to Garcia is not based on sex and passion but power and control. She finally betrays Garcia by pretending to seduce him while others lie in wait for him.

Luisa, head of the Frente Popular, leads ordinary citizens in bearing arms

in protest against the inhuman conditions imposed by San Martin's right-wing government. She and others in the organization have worked for years to earn the confidence of the suspicious villagers who had earlier trusted the American and San Martin governments to introduce land reforms and were betrayed. The villagers learn to use their power in numbers as the Frente Popular's mandate derives from its ability to serve the needs of the people rather than forcing people to serve the needs of an oppressive bureaucracy.

### ***Steeltown* (1984): Real World Action**

American steel companies such as U.S. Steel and Bethlehem Steel controlled a major portion of the world's market until the 1980's. The steel corporations were largely unwilling to invest in expensive rebuilding of their aging plants and diversified by placing their profits into other industries. The steel makers could not compete with newly industrialized countries such as China, Brazil, and South Korea with their government subsidies and lower labor costs. Steelworkers, having little access to resources other than their own labor, were caught in the middle. The forces of the steel market left the plant workers vulnerable. They were not free to choose their jobs over involuntary and inadequate unemployment compensation.

### **Plot Action of Fictional World**

The play centers on the story of two steelworker families (Joe and Annabelle Magarack, Linda and Louie Lucero) in Steel town, California. The steel mill, the main source of income and stability in the town, threatens to close and switch operations to Taiwan unless production at the mill increases. The employer, U.S. Steel, has promised that improved productivity will at least save the particular plant that Joe Magarack has worked in for twenty five years.

*Steeltown* contains two acts: Act I takes place in 1980 and Act II is a flashback to August 1945, after World War II, at the same plant. In the first act, a middle-aged Joe and his fellow workers have been putting in long hours and taking pay cuts in hopes of keeping the plant open and saving their jobs. Annabelle, in the wake of Joe's obsession with work, has gone to college and developed outside interests in tae-kwan-do and French impressionist painting. She and Joe argue about his failing health and his lack of interest in anything besides work. In the end, Annabelle leaves Joe to begin a new life.

The Magaracks' neighbors, the Luceros, play out almost the exact scene in their own kitchen. Louie, fired from the mill, resents staying at home while Linda works out of town to support the family.

Act II is played as a 1940's Broadway musical. The scenes alternate between the mill and the bar, where the workers gather in their off-hours.

The second act is the playing out of the love story between Annabelle and Joe. The parallel between Joe and Annabelle's marriage and the "marriage" between the workers, union, and the steel company is that the company moves away and Annabelle leaves Joe.

### Character Action

Annabelle's character is pivotal to the plot action. Her character is the most fully drawn and dramatically developed in the play. It is not accidental that she has taken up impressionist painting and martial arts as new interests. She tells Joe that the techniques of the Impressionist painters can be applied as a metaphor for life. "People act in one certain way, because they learn to see things in one certain light" (Holden 1984: 2). All Joe can see is his own work at the steel mill and not the larger picture of how only the plant owners and management profit from the overtime work he and his friends have put in. Annabelle wants Joe to see reality in a "new light" and later compares her study of tae-kwan-do to achieving self-esteem in real life: "It's a thrill when you win ... but even if you don't it gives you the courage to stand up for yourself" (13). Annabelle is not dependent on Joe to fulfill all of her needs and, in fact, wants Joe to become more independent of the whims of the plant owners and management.

The script notes that Act I should be played as farce. Annabelle is usually in the middle of the comedy. For example, in the first scene, she weaves the *Man of Steel* story to keep Joe at home and the story turns out to be true. Later in the bar, Joe's boss pours out his troubles with Joe to Annabelle, not knowing her identity, while Annabelle is frantically trying to warn Linda (during the one time Linda decides to dance with a male friend from class) that her jealous husband Louie is also in the bar.

In Act II, Annabelle rejects the radical local union leader, Rudy, to marry Joe who campaigns for short term comforts over self-determination. Joe has agreed to the union International's offer from the steel company for higher pay in exchange for a no-strike clause in the workers' contract. This contract with plant management takes away the basic rights of the steel workers in determining working conditions and benefits and leaves them helpless in the wake of the plant closing twenty five years later.

Finally, Annabelle must leave Joe because while alternative means of economic survival in the town, such as worker-owned businesses could be implemented, she knows that Joe, still believing in post World War II prosperity, could not accept changes that place social and environmental concerns over competitiveness and profit.

Linda, Annabelle's friend and neighbor, holds her family together while her husband Louie is depressed and unemployed. Linda gains self-confidence by talking over her domestic problems with Annabelle and new skills by taking self-defense lessons. Linda discovers, in the company of other

women, that she is not alone and possesses the power to help herself and her family with or without Louie.

### ***The Mozamgola Caper (1986): Real World Action***

The Mozamgola Caper is about the CIA's interference with South African politics. The mythical African country of Mozamgola is a combination of the names of two real-life African countries, Mozambique and Angola. The connection of Mozambique to the play is that the attempt on Luthulu's life in Mozamgola paralleled the real-life air crash death of Mozambique's president, Samora Machel. Machel's death occurred only weeks after the play was written, in the fall of 1986. (Parks 11). The Angola connection involved the joining of the American right with South Africa in backing guerilla forces against the Angolan government.

### **Plot Action of Fictional World**

The play examines the spectrum of relationships between men and women and colonized people and their oppressors. Apartheid, as one character says, "exists between white and black people in South Africa and between advanced countries and developing ones" (Holden 1986: 47).

The action of the play begins in New York City when an assassination attempt is made on the life of exiled South African leader Bishop Tata at a "Hands Across America" benefit. CIA agent Regretta Johnson's mission is to save Tata's life and secure U.S. interests in Mozamgola by following Tata back to her homeland. There Tata is to speak at a historic meeting to be attended by Third World leaders where he will unveil a new secret weapon. This meeting has been arranged by the socialist president of Mozamgola, Winston Luthulu. Luthulu, Regretta, and Obeh (leader of the "freedom fighters" against Luthulu's government) were all political science students fifteen years ago of Regretta's CIA boss and White House Special Advisor, Woodfin Debarge. Debarge tells Regretta that it is up to her to keep Mozamgola from turning bloody and "red," i.e. Communist. She must find out how Luthulu (so Debarge tells her) is going to kill Tata and then prevent the murder from occurring. Unknown to Regretta is that Obeh's freedom-fighters are being paid and armed by Debarge and the CIA. Perceiving the truth only a few seconds before a bomb that she helped plant on Tata explodes, Regretta throws her body on top of the bomb and dies.

### **Character Action**

Regretta (who regrets that her line of work has forced her to cheat and lie in the name of freedom) is deceived by Debarge (a white, paternal figure). Regretta unquestioningly trusts Debarge when he tells her that her two of her former boyfriends, Luthulu and Obeh, are fighting each other for control of



Mozamgola. Although Regretta (mistakenly) believes Luthulu to be the enemy, she follows her heart. In a split second after learning that the “secret weapon” is not a literal piece of equipment, but a debt moratorium on First World banks, Regretta chooses to give up her life (and not regret her actions in the line of duty this time) to save Luthulu and Tata, and to allow for the possibility for exploited Third World nations to finally live in peace and freedom.

Ndele, Luthulu’s aide, can speak out strongly for her country’s independence from foreign influence, but cannot do so on a personal level. As a prototypic servant of the cause, Ndele denies she loves Luthulu because in armed struggle there is no time for romance. She has been taught in a patriarchal society that such “feminine” values of love and commitment threaten one’s sense of independence, if not viability to the cause.

Ulrike (a woman of possibly Nazi descent) maintains a type of sadomasochistic relationship with Obeh (an African-American). Their scenes together involve sleeping darts, knives, and other sundry sharp weapons. As Obeh’s lover and partner in the CIA takeover of Mozamgola, Ulrike is happy to do anything that “helps Africans kill Africans.” Ulrike’s animosity towards Regretta and Obeh expresses the racist and expansionist desires of the First World to divide and conquer the Third World. Her social role in capitalist patriarchy requires her to compete against other women for male attention and power. Ulrike considers Obeh only her latest conquest because she is solely concerned with prolonging her own survival. She boasts that she has proven her worth in participating in other CIA coups involving the dictatorships of Zaire’s Patrice Lumumba and Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi.

### ***Ripped Van Winkle* (1988): Real World Action**

The Mime Troupe, based in San Francisco and reflective of the city’s tradition of artistic ferment and left-oriented politics, elected to examine its own legacy (from its counterculture origins in the 1960’s to the winning of Broadway’s Tony Award in the 1980’s) within the action of their last play written and produced during the Reagan years.

In doing research for *Ripped*, Joan Holden has commented,

We didn’t only want to reflect the experience of people over 40, so we talked to a lot of kids, both middle-class kids and crack dealers in trouble with the law, the so-called ‘lost kids’. . . The biggest difference I found in what kids think now and what we thought in the 60’s is this lack of hope, this loss of belief that people can work together to make the future better.

(Berson 41)

The major question the play asks is: How does the radical from 1968 continue to believe in 1988 in the possibilities of social change and take positive action toward those goals?

### **Plot Action of Fictional World**

Rip wakes up after twenty years (all he remembers is a scantily clad French woman) in Golden Gate Park under a pile of leaves and local San Francisco artifacts: a torn piece of the Diggers' alternative newspaper, the San Francisco Oracle, dated July 22, 1968, a faded bumper sticker, and other pieces of city history.

Although Rip was "ripped," (drunk or under the influence of drugs) when he fell asleep, he was also "intoxicated" by the idea that he was part of a new American generation, destined to succeed where others had failed in this quest for a freer, more egalitarian society than the one they had inherited. The principal credo of 1960's recreational drug use was experimentation and enhancement of visual and mental awareness, sometimes as part of a larger anti-Establishment agenda. However, in the 1980's, the drugs of choice like crack cocaine served to keep people sedated and politically immobile while the disparity between socio-economic classes grew.

Rip finds himself in a drastically altered physical, social, and political environment than the one he remembers in 1968. His adventures take him to a trendy restaurant (built where his home used to be), an upscale boutique, a homeless shelter in the Haight, a "Homeport the Missouri" festival, and back to the park where he is reunited with his "old lady," Susan, and her daughter, Sunrise.

### **Character Action**

Susan is a "Current Events" planner and frazzled single mother, who past 40 years of age, wants a more comfortable life for herself and Sunrise. Upon reaching middle age, Susan sees her friends enjoying luxuries that she too could have obtained if she had taken on distasteful accounts that paid well instead of volunteering for liberal-left causes that she still believes in. Susan decides to accept the job of promoting San Francisco Bay as the home base for the nuclear warship, U.S.S. Missouri (even though she is opposed to war and the dredging of the bay) because it means making important business contacts and more money. Susan, as a socially aware person, is not naive or lacking of the facts, but has become more cynical and uncertain about the actions necessary to bring about social justice and equality. Yet Susan does not hesitate to join in when her public relations rally turns into a protest march against the ship's homeporting. The impetus for Susan to return to social activism is to secure a less violent, non-toxic future not only for her daughter, but for other peoples' sons and daughters as well. A better, safer world in which people choose to work for peace and harmony instead of death and destruction will be a more useful legacy to leave Sunrise and other young people than social status or material goods.

Sunrise (who is half-white and half-Japanese), represents both physically

and spiritually the generation of the 1980's and beyond. Her role in the play is indicative of the increased numbers of minorities that now comprise the American populace. Sunrise has some of the spirit we imagine Susan had in her younger years, but she also despairs that people are uncaring and unfeeling about anything outside of themselves and that this situation is not going to change. Sunrise considers suicide because she thinks it is better than "seeing the earth die or sleepwalk through life like most people" (Holden 1988: 19). Her faith in the human species is restored when she and "three thousand" people connect with one another from the harbor to City Hall to speak out against the battleship's anchoring in San Francisco Bay.

The mysterious French woman does not make an appearance until the end of the play. She is Liberte, the Spirit of 1789, of the French Revolution. As she explains Rip's decades-long nap:

'68, it was an excellent year. I knew a bad time would come after, and all the good vintage would be consumed ... Not just you — there are many, many all over the world. And now a better time is coming.

(40-41).

Wine spirits are used as a metaphor for the "spirit" of oppressed people toward freedom. The spirit of the people for Liberty and freedom has been kept in storage, like bottled wine, for use in more uncertain times when it seems as though all hope is lost. Rip, (and by extension, the San Francisco Mime Troupe) are spirits from the Movement of the 1960's who are still working towards social change in the 1980's. His function, like the Mime Troupe's, is to inspire both the older generation of lapsed radicals and the young people of the present generation to learn from the past and to work together for a morally just and socially equitable world.

### Conclusion

This paper asserts that the San Francisco Mime Troupe plays of the 1980's were critiques of the conservative rhetoric of the decade that by design utilized an essentially conservative theatre form, the melodrama (with its stereotyped characters and depiction of social ills), to rally against a conservative agenda embodied in the 1980's by the Reagan presidency. Joan Holden, as principal writer for the company, chose to use the sentimental and histrionic melodrama form as part of a creative and political strategy for social change.

Holden's framing of social actions within a conventional form allow her plays to be enjoyed by diverse audiences because they contain elements of action/adventure, romance, and slapstick humor. For example, the usual trappings of the spy genre (exotic locales, secret agents, poison cocktails and darts, mistaken identities, and kidnappings) are presented for satiric effect in *Americans* and *Mozamgola*. Almost all of the female characters in the plays

are contemplating, renewing, or ending romantic hetero sexual relationships. While all of the plays are musical comedies, the scenes in *Steeltown* and *Ripped Van Winkle* contain some of the funniest: Annabelle is the dissatisfied and disruptive housewife in the television sitcom tradition of Lucille Ball, and Rip's displacement in 1988 allows for both nostalgia and criticism of 1960's radical chic.

The qualities of responsibility and reciprocity, and the values of nurturance and interrelation, customarily associated solely with women, characterize Holden's ideal citizenry. As depicted in the plays, female subjugation is an aspect of social injustice. The "heroic" characters made changes in and took responsibility for their own lives and by doing so, inspired others to follow suit. However, even the actions of the "villains" address the frailties of patriarchy. Phyllis Wrench and Ulrike think of themselves as strong women, even able to destroy the lives of others, but both women are unable to see that they are also being manipulated by their own government.

Common to almost all of the plays was the fact that the person who instigated social change and action in the male-dominated environment was a woman whose work combined the personal with the political. Laura used her camera to capture the news the American and San Martin governments wanted to conceal, while Luisa took up arms to defend indigenous rights and Rufina helped both herself and the people of her village by trapping Garcia; Annabelle left her husband to start a new life which had the effect of forcing Joe into reevaluating his "marriage" relationship to both her and the steel mill; and Regretta forfeited her life to save her lover and to help bring about world peace. Many of the major female characters in the plays were also people of color: Luisa, Rufina, Regretta, Ndele, and Sunrise.

The range of solutions suggested for socio-political change in this group of plays included exposure of previously hidden facts, active (if not armed) resistance, the formation of a community with other peoples that instigated economic and political sanctions against one's oppressors without the use of high-tech weapons of destruction, and not giving up when all hope seemed lost. Ordinary people realizing their power in numbers and starting to right social and economic wrongs by refusing to be further exploited, is the vision of social change provided to us by Joan Holden and the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

Such scenarios correspond to what the Troupe believes is part of the function of its comic and political work: to make a difference by giving people reasons and information to think about whose interests are served by ignorance of the facts, despair about the facts, or more probably, apathy. Collective action does not preclude individual choice. When faced with the facts and evidence that expose misconceptions and lies perpetuated by powerful and elite interests in society, it is each individual's responsibility to choose to work for change or to endure the unjust conditions. The influence

of the Mime Troupe lies in setting sparks, in setting the groundwork for change. It has always been up to the public to make the ideas for change become realities.

The Mime Troupe wanted to recreate in their plays of the 1980's, the experience of belonging to and finding power in being part of a community, whether it be intellectual, emotional, or even residential. Through their fictional recreations, the company believed that their audiences (after taking sides in the social conflicts presented in the plays) would be more likely to get involved in actions for change outside the performances. The Troupe's aesthetic of utilizing satire to inform, inspire, and challenge its audiences to enact, in some small way, change for equality and social justice, was and is one of optimism. This aesthetic assumes the unjust powers that control the social system cannot ultimately triumph. Only a lack of knowledge and an unfounded trust in an economic and political system that isolates people into classes and party factions keep the disenfranchised inactive.

Into the 1990's, Mime Troupe members have made a conscious decision to continue to write and produce plays that engage audiences in a critical dialogue. As the American people inaugurate a new President and welcome the return of a democratic administration to the White House, hope for social change is renewed. Yet the wheels of justice turn slowly and all the while, the San Francisco Mime Troupe continues to spearhead the challenge against oppressive relationships of all kinds — between races, between sexes, between elites and the disenfranchised, between people and their governments — showing people that the power they are searching for lies within themselves.

University of Hawaii at Manoa

### Notes

1. Since 1984, the San Francisco Mime Troupe began to accept federal grants in order to survive hard economic times, but as one member put it, the Troupe continues to "bite the hand that feeds it."
2. See Michael Booth, *English Melodrama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965) for an interesting history of the form.
3. "Why Haig Fired Ambassador," *San Francisco Chronicle* 3 February 1981: 7; "Ex-Salvador Envoy Fired," *San Francisco Chronicle* 2 March 1981: 2; "Ousted Envoy Flails Reagan Policy," *San Francisco Chronicle* 18 May 1981: 14.

### Works Cited

- Berson, Misha. "Ripped Van Winkle: 60's Hippie in the '80's." *San Francisco Chronicle* 17 July 1988, Datebook: 41.
- Booth, Michael. *English Melodrama*. London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965.
- . "Ex-Salvador Envoy Fired." *San Francisco Chronicle* 2 March 1981: 2.
- Holden, Joan. *Americans, or Last Tango in Huahuateno*. tms. Copyright SFMT, 1981.
- . "Comedy and Revolution." *Arts in Society* 6.3 (Winter 1969): 415-20.
- . "Satire and Politics in America or Why is that President Still Smiling?" *Theatre* 10.2 (Spring 1979): 104-107.
- . *Steeltown*. tms. Copyright SFMT, 1984.
- . "The Melodrama is the Message." *American Theatre* 6.7 (Oct. 1989): 42-4, 122.
- and Ellen Callas, with Sharon Lockwood and Keiko Shimosato. *Ripped Van Winkle*. tms. Copyright SFMT, 1988.
- and John O'Neil, with Robert Alexander. *The Mozambique Caper*. tms. Copyright SFMT, 1986.
- "Ousted Envoy Flails Reagan Policy." *San Francisco Chronicle* 18 May 1981: 14.
- Parks, Michael. "Mozambicans Continue to Mourn Samora Michel and Ponder Future." *San Francisco Chronicle* 27 October 1986: 11.
- "Why Haig Fired Ambassador." *San Francisco Chronicle* 3 February 1981: 7.



Κατά τη δεκαετία του 1980 τα πρωτότυπα έργα της ομάδας San Francisco Mime Troupe, χρησιμοποιώντας τα λαϊκά στοιχεία της σάτιρας και του Δυτικού μελοδράματος, κατέκρινε τη συντηρητική ρητορική της πολιτικής του Ρήγκαν, αρθρώνοντας κοινό καθημερινό ενδιαφέρον για θέματα όπως η ανεργία, η έλλειψη στέγης και η κυβερνητική διαφθορά. Η τοποθέτηση κοινωνικών πράξεων μέσα στη φόρμα του μελοδράματος από την κυριότερη δραματουργό του θιάσου, τη Joan Holden, επιτρέπει στα έργα της να είναι αρεστά σε ποικίλα ακροατήρια, διότι περιέχουν στοιχεία κωμωδίας, ρομάντζου και δράσης / περιπέτειας. Όπως σκιαγραφείται στα περισσότερα απ' αυτά τα έργα, η γυναικεία υποταγή είναι μια όψη κοινωνικής αδικίας. Οι πράξεις των γυναικείων χαρακτήρων, σε τέσσερα από αυτά τα κείμενα της Holden της δεκαετίας του 1980, παρουσιάζουν τις γυναίκες να επιφέρουν κοινωνική αλλαγή δια μέσου οργανωμένης δράσης / συνεργασίας που ξεπερνά τα οικονομικά, φυλετικά και ταξικά όρια και αγγίζει το γενικό ανθρώπινο συμφέρον.