The playâ??s the thing as Michael Sullivan and the San Francisco Mime Troupe bring new meaning to â??A Christmas Carolâ?•

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Michael Gene Sullivanâ??s version of Charles Dickensâ?? traditional â??A Christmas Carolâ?• is not about Scrooge, the miser who hates the holiday.

Sullivanâ??s â??A Red Carolâ?• is â??about everyone else,â?• a world unrepentant for its cruelties, said the 64-year-old resident director of the San Francisco Mime Troupe, appearing at San Franciscoâ??s Z Space Theater through December 29.

The play is a radical reimagining of the classic tale; itâ??s a play within a play which takes place in a homeless encampment where residents are putting on a version of â??A Christmas Carol.â?•

The narrator reminds the audience that in Dickensâ?? time the poor were shunted to workhouses to work off their debts and sometimes were made to walk on treadmills to keep busy.

Sullivan, who is Black, and a veteran San Francisco actor, director, and playwright, said he is committed â??to developing theater of social and economic justice, of political self-determination, and, of course, musical comedy.

Michael Gene Sullivan, the longtime San Francisco actor, director and playwright who directed â??A Red Carol.â?• (Photo by Colin Campbell.)

â??Our job is to point out the hypocrisy of poverty in the richest nation in history, the hypocrisy of any oppression in a country that promises justice for all.â?•

His play â??Sign My Name to Freedom: The Unheard Songs of Betty Reid Soskinâ?• is about the nationâ??s oldest park ranger, a woman of mixed Black and Creole heritage. It played earlier this year at the San Francisco Bay Area Theatre Company.

â??1984,â?• his stage adaptation of George Orwellâ??s classic novel about totalitarianism, has had repeated runs in Los Angeles and been performed in 40 states in the U.S. Published in six languages, it has toured to Australia, Europe, Asia, Central and South America.

At the epicenter of the revolution

Sullivan began his life in Los Angeles, where his parents were activists. His mother worked for Robert F. Kennedyâ??s presidential campaign and was present the night he was assassinated in 1968.

â??The FBI, concerned she might be in danger as a witness, asked my parents to leave Los Angeles for their own safety,â?• said Sullivan, who was 6 years old at the time.

â??My parents picked San Francisco as the place to go because they wanted to be at the epicenter of the coming revolution,â?• Sullivan said. His father was a software engineer; his mother worked in public relations.

They saw comedy as â??an integral part of the revolution,â?• he said, â??so my family always went to every civil-rights and anti-war protest, as well as every comedy event,â?• including the San Francisco Mime Troupe.

â??It was the perfect match of politics, history, and comedy,â?• he said. â??Little did I know how important seeing that show would be in my life.â?• He joined the troupe in 1988 and never left.

â??A Red Carolâ?• is an opportunity for Sullivan to mold a work that echoes the revolutionary message of the Mime Troupe, a fixture of Bay Area theater for more than 60 years.

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Keiko Shimosato as an apparition and Mike McShane as Scrooge rehearse a scene from â??A Red Carol.â?• (Photo by Colin Campbell.)

Itâ??s also a chance to expand beyond the troupeâ??s core audience of baby boomers, children of the â??60s who grew up watching its players use satire and music to skewer the powerful and transmit an anti-capitalist sentiment.

For the first time in more than 20 years, the troupe will perform indoors instead of in the parks and charge an admission fee. â??A lot of our audience has gotten to the point in life where they donâ??t want to sit down in the grass anymore,â?• said Sullivan.

But the passage of time and the aging of his audience has not prompted him to abandon his vision of radical theater.

Writing from the Left

His writing attacks both conservatives and liberals in their attitudes toward the oppressed. â??My experience as a Black American male gives me perspective as a part of society that continues to be economically oppressed and assumed criminal,â?• he said.

Politics aside, his plays are often funny and broadly satirical.

Decades ago, he found a congenial home with the like-minded members of the Mime Troupe, which despite its name, is anything but silent. Its works include music, songs, and the spoken word. It bills itself as â??Never silent, always revolutionary.â?•

Over the years, Sullivan has acted in productions at 17 California theaters, appeared in festivals in New York and Vancouver, had parts in five movies, and worked in commercials and industrial films.

He has written or co-written more than 30 plays for the Mime Troupe and other theaters and conducted workshops and guest lectures on playwriting at Yale, Stanford, Dartmouth, and the University of Southern California. He won a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2022.

â??A Red Carolâ?• also gives Sullivan a chance to work again with Velina Brown, a longtime collaborator and his wife. They met in band class at Roosevelt Junior High School in San Francisco and then attended Washington High School and San Francisco State University.

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Velina Brown, appearing in â??A Red Carol.â?• (Photo courtesy of the San Francisco Mime Troupe.)

â??In high school, I had a crush on Velina but didnâ??t tell her because I was too shy,â?• he said. â??Even though the last thing I was thinking of was being an actor, I auditioned for the student theater company in part just to be around her more. Thatâ??s how it really all started.â?•

Sullivan and Brown have been in dozens of plays together and have directed each other, he said. â??We did a farce once where Velina played my mother and my love interest, and I played her son â?? and the man romantically interested in my mother.â?•

But they didnâ??t marry or have children immediately. â??Weâ??re cautious people,â?• Sullivan said. The couple, who live near the Haight-Asbury district, married in 1992. â??It took 12 years before we decided to have our one kid.â?• Their son, Zachary, 21, now attends San Francisco State.

Brown plays multiple roles in â??A Red Carol,â?• where she strums a guitar and sings a solo.

Although the Troupe has a youthful vibe, its audiences skew relatively old. â??All theaters have older audiences,â?• Sullivan said. â??More mature citizens are more likely to have the time and finances and are at a point in their lives where they want the philosophical and emotional conversations theater provides.â?•

Even so, heâ??s optimistic about the potential for youthful audiences to help keep the Mime Troupe going. â??We host benefit performances for youth-related issues, comedy and musical artists who speak to different ages, and political conversations that reach across generations,â?• said Sullivan. â??We do what we can.â?•

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Lean times for the troupe

Finances, though, are a challenge for the troupe. True to its anti-establishment ethos, it doesnâ??t accept corporate donations and with the rare exception, performances are free. It does accept grants from foundations, but that funding stream is slowing. At the end of each performance, cast members circulate through the audience, shaking cans and waving hats urging viewers to dig deep and â??get rid of that filthy money.â?•

Falling into theater in high school was a surprise, he said. Heâ??s a history buff who has about 100 volumes on the subject in his home library. â??I thought I was going to grow up to be a history teacher, and I was very happy with that.

But heâ??s been very happy with the career he fell into, one full of highlights. â??Performing across the United States, off-Broadway, touring to the Middle East, Europe, Asia, having plays Iâ??ve written be published and produced in countries around the world.

â??Belting out a song to a rapt crowd, playing Malvolio in a great Shakespearean production (of â??Twelfth Nightâ?•), watching a show Iâ??d directed hit the audience where they need to be hit, or teaching a high school class about the importance of writing plays to change the world â?? all of it is a highlight.â?•

Michael Sullivan, left, directing Mike McShane in â??A Red Carol.â?• (Photo by Colin Campbell.)

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Author
mary-anne-lewis