

PAT CRAIG: THEATER

## The audience's input keeps 'Puppet' lively

By Pat Craig  
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Improvisational theater is tightrope walking for those who prefer both feet on the ground. Add puppets and music, and you get a rodeo of wit, and the clever construct of "The Great Puppet Musical," a new play each time it hits the stage, by San Francisco's Un-scripted Theater Company.

The company, which has been performing since late 2002, boasts a cast of excellent improvisers who were inspired to bring songs and puppets into their glib little family. While musical parody is nothing new to improv, and while puppets, after "Sesame Street" and "Avenue Q," are nothing new to theater, the blending adds an exciting new mix to the improv arsenal.

Not only does it offer an unusual visual element, but it also gives the performers additional comedic possibilities. This production, directed by Mandy Khoshnevisan, who also performs with the troupe, begins like most improv comedy -- by asking audience members for some basic concepts for the show.

On Thursday's opening night, the audience-selected theme was procrastination, and an opening number that dealt with the various sorts of putting-it-off behavior mentioned by the audience. It then quickly evolved into a musical that might be called, "How to Fail at Business by Trying Too Hard," the tale of a young man who puts off asking for a raise and ultimately is fired through the double-dealing efforts of an overly ambitious co-worker.

To say any more about the opening night story would be silly, since the tale told will be different each night, depending on the suggestions of the audience, who happens to be in the cast (the company uses maybe a half-dozen of its 11-member troupe in each show), and how the creative winds happen to be blowing on a particular night.

For audiences, this is the ultimate theatrical experiment. The show is being made up as it goes along, so there is a chance that some of it will fall flat on its face, which appeals to some improv fans (with similar tastes to those who go to car races to see crashes). There will be bits that don't work in just about every performance, but most shows tend to be combinations of diamonds and dirt. The reward, for both the performers and the audience, happens when everything comes together in an energy storm of hilarity and produces something close to comic alchemy.

Since the performers all appear, from their program bios, to have considerable experience with the craft, chances are the scales will tip toward the good each night. That was certainly the case in Thursday's opener, particularly with the songs, which not only played wonderfully, but added to the story.

Most impressive, though, were the pacing and construction of the improvised play into a fully realized story. Not only did the show provide plenty of chuckles, it actually formed a plot, made logical progression and came to a satisfying conclusion -- quite a feat for something made up on the spot. This is bare-bones theater, with much of the visual detail left to the imagination; it's just people, puppets and a few chairs to represent the improvised plot.

Pat Craig is the Times theater critic. Reach him at 925-945-4736 or [pcraig@cctimes.com](mailto:pcraig@cctimes.com).

### THEATER REVIEW

- WHAT: The Un-scripted Theater Company presents "The Great Puppet Musical," an improvisation
- WHEN: Thursdays-Saturdays, through June 2
- WHERE: S.F. Playhouse Second Stage, 533 Sutter St., S.F.
- RUNNING TIME: 1 hour, 45 minutes

- HOW MUCH: \$15
- CONTACT: [www.un-scripted.com](http://www.un-scripted.com)

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