Fatal stumble in the jungle

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The People's Temple, *written and directed by Leigh Fondakowski, with additional writing and dramaturgy by Greg Pierotti, Stephen Wangh and Margo Hall. At the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Berkeley, California, through June 5, 2005.*

The People's Temple, now receiving its world premiere at Berkeley Repertory Theatre's Roda Theatre, is tantalizing yet ultimately unsatisfying. Its subject is the Peoples Temple, the communitarian Pentecostal church founded by Rev. Jim Jones in 1955 and whose notoriety was sealed in 1978 when 914 of its members committed suicide at Jonestown, Guyana. (The apostrophe in the title has been added by the authors to distinguish the play from the name of the actual institution.)

The show is a series of personal statements made to the audience by members of the Temple, living and dead, supplemented by statements from a select few whose lives intersected with its members and interspersed with gospel music set pieces performed by the entire ensemble. The story, reconstructed from carefully edited transcripts and material culled from the California Historical Society's archives, is told chronologically.

The story begins in 1955 when Jones, who had already attracted a primarily black following, refused an offer to become minister of an all-white church in Indianapolis. Our first image of Jones, then, is of a sternly principled man walking away from a golden career opportunity in order to found a racially inclusive congregation. An early member of the church, Hyacinth Thrash (Miche Braden, a standout in a uniformly superb cast), tells us how Jones cured her breast cancer through a laying on of hands. It's not until late in the second act, when Jones and the church are under attack, that the fraud of such healings is revealed (the removed tumors turn out to be raw chicken livers.).

Perhaps most disturbing to the good patriotic Christian folk of Indiana were Jones's repeated assertions that Christian practice, when properly nurtured, finds its truest expression in communal life and primitive communism. For Jones to publicly avow such radical egalitarianism and racial equality in the very heartland of Copperhead reaction, and to publicly self-identify as a socialist in the aftermath of the McCarthyite anticommunist frenzy, was, at the very least, provocative.

By the early 1960s, the Peoples Temple was drawing ever greater numbers from among Indianapolis's poorer citizens. Its food drives, "free restaurant" serving thousands, free medical care and occupational training, established its reputation as a major social service institution. The Temple had its own nursing homes, weekly TV and radio shows; its integrated gospel choir released an album ("He's Able").

Jones and about a hundred members relocated in 1965 to Redwood Valley, a remote area of Northern California near Ukiah in Mendocino County, a site selected because it had appeared on a published short-list of places in the US most likely to survive a nuclear attack. They soon had communal gardens, a communal kitchen, and a fleet of buses with which its members took to the road, evangelizing in San Francisco, Los Angeles and elsewhere.

By 1973, with over 2,500 members and churches in both San Francisco and Los Angeles, the Peoples Temple voted to create an agricultural commune in Guyana. As work progressed at Jonestown, the group moved its headquarters to San Francisco where the Temple and Jones quickly became major players in the political life of the city. Their ability to turn out crowds of demonstrators on 30-minutes notice made Jones someone that leading Democratic Party politicians like San Francisco Mayor George Moscone, State Assemblyman (and eventual Speaker of the California State Assembly and two-term mayor of San Francisco) Willie Brown and vice presidential hopeful Walter Mondale needed to cultivate.

In 1977 the edifice cracked. Former members and relatives of current members began talking to the press, accusing Jones and his inner circle of child abuse, dictatorial social engineering, sexual harassment, coerced appropriation of members' wealth and dismal living conditions at Jonestown and the Temple. With official investigations under way, Jones and hundreds of his followers abruptly transplanted to Guyana.

A year later Rep. Leo J. Ryan (Democrat of California) led a fact-finding mission to Jonestown. Ryan and his group were, at first, favorably impressed with the good work being done. But on the eve of their departure, Ryan was approached by some 20 frightened members who claimed they were being held in Jonestown against their will. They begged Ryan to take them back to the states. Before the planes could take off, Ryan, his group, and most of the refugees were gunned down. At roughly the same time, back at the Jonestown jungle compound, cyanide-laced Kool-Aid was being passed out.

The people (I'm reluctant to call them characters) who populate this work of theatre never talk to one another, only to the audience. There is no dialogue. The piece is set in a beautifully sleek and atmospherically lit archive—sturdy six-tier racks of filing boxes that suggest an airy, spacious library-stack repository. Members of the ensemble first appear wearing white museum gloves, carefully handling documents. Subtly we're told that these archived documents are precious, worthy of preservation. This is staged documentary, its narrative gleaned from personal statements, in essence, a theatre of personal anecdote, performance art on an operatic scale.

Problematic—especially so for most visitors to this web site—was Jones's public self-identification as a "socialist and Marxist." There's no indication, either in this play or elsewhere, that he ever made an effort to clarify his principles or political thinking. Just because Jones found occasion to quote Marx or lay claim to socialism, did not make him a socialist (he also claimed sympathy for Stalin). By all accounts, Jones was opportunistic and self-serving. As his public profile rose, Jones cultivated alliances with established political players in the Bay Area and with the leadership of the Democratic Party. As his political power expanded, the Temple itself increasingly became cultic, an extension of Jones's private passions and personal agenda.

It's been almost 27 years now since 914 members of the Peoples Temple ingested cyanide-laced Kool-Aid at their commune in that remote Guyanese rainforest. Their vision of a new world had become a paranoid nightmare of weeping mothers pouring poison down the throats of their infants. Jones characterized the mass suicide as a "necessary revolutionary act." Marthea Hicks (superbly played by Margo Hall) makes a last-minute appeal to Jones, by asking if it isn't better to live, to trust in God, and deal with tomorrow when it comes. Jones, lost in the tunnel-vision of his own

literal death-trip, ignores her. The communal final, fatal act of these 900-plus men, women and children was one born of despair, a response to real but mostly imagined persecution, and a group psychosis induced by a delusionally grandiose man trapped in the final paroxysms of methamphetamine abuse.

This production challenges its audience with the hypothetical: Are you sure that, under similar circumstances, you too wouldn't have become a member of the Peoples Temple? As a lure, the character of Liz Forman Schwartz (played with élan by Lauren Klein) is pivotal. Here's a secular Jewish woman of the late 1960s, hungry for meaning and belonging, and for whom the communitarian trappings of Jones's message were deeply appealing. Featuring Ms. Schwartz's story rather than that of one of the other 2,000 is a revealing choice.

The sympathies of the writers and other artists involved in this project naturally extend to the people whose lives they're portraying and whose stories they've appropriated. They genuinely want to hear their stories, their voices, their varied perspectives. They refuse to pre-judge them. Nor do they want these stories used as evidence in an indictment. Even the program book's supplementary material avoids any mention of the depravities endured at Jonestown. The authors' sympathies find their fullest expression in the musical finale, a gospel tune sung by the entire ensemble titled "Walk a Mile in My Shoes," a blatant, albeit honey-dipped challenge to the audience *not* to pass judgment on these people without first fully understanding who they are, what they really did, and why they did it.

The image of the choir—a fully racially integrated choir—is important for this portrait of the Peoples Temple, especially so since this production is telling the story of the community and not just its headliner. As a way of underscoring this intention, Jones is represented by two different members of the ensemble (James Carpenter and John McAdams, two fine actors of distinctly different height, age, build, hair and voice).

The People's Temple is a tantalizing piece of theatre in that it offers a wide range of personal perspectives on what the Peoples Temple was, how it grew, and why it attracted so many congregants, especially from among the poor and black. It's unsatisfying in that by keeping absolute faith with its conventions and refusing to judge the people it portrays or their thinking, it refuses to go beyond the narrowly personal and therefore yields the broader perspectives and deeper insights to others. Yet if they are to hand this responsibility over to the audience, the makers of *The People's Temple* have a duty to be far more critical and a lot less laissez-faire about the content of their subject.

There are suggestions galore that the Temple's appeal for the poor, neglected and dispossessed was its promise of personal empowerment and sense of community. This production suggests that for most of the people portrayed, that promise was fulfilled. Absent, however, is the tough analysis that would have allowed us to understand how someone like Jones could take that promise and manipulate his followers into a dehumanizing cult that became increasingly paranoid and obsessed with a "Final Days" destiny. There is a surprising, almost squeamish reluctance to address the social and moral conditions that give rise to such cults or to expose the distortions of apocalyptic fervor that sabotage these simple human aspirations.

Everything about this material should appeal to anyone who visits the WSWS. It's about a complex event, a number of interlocking social issues, most notably the intersection of politics and religion; its most visible figure is a self-proclaimed "socialist"; it's produced by theatre artists of proven ability (Fondakowski and others were key players in the justly acclaimed *The Laramie Project*—about the town of Laramie, Wyoming where the horrific 1998 murder of Matthew Shepard, a young gay man, occurred) in a major professional venue with all the theatrical apparatus needed to stage a spectacle.

This show was three years in the making. Here's an ensemble that rises to the challenges of a big stage, a cast that exudes star power; it's got great music, inventive staging, evocative design. With all these elements, and given its subject, this production should have soared. Yet it didn't. In *The Laramie Project* tolerance was championed, prejudice was vilified; in *The People's Temple*, the history, personalities and values of the Peoples Temple become a test case for the limits of the artists' and audience's tolerance.

Missing from this account are the well-documented extreme practices of a cult that manipulated the hearts, minds and bodies of its members. Missing, for example, is any concrete description of conditions at Jonestown. Poorly nourished men, women and children were forced to work the fields for 11 hours, six days a week, and seven hours on Sunday. Armed guards patrolled the perimeter to prevent escape and to punish slackers. The population was housed in crude barracks. Malingerers were socially isolated, forced to work double-time or chemically sedated.

There is no shortage of contrary interpretations of how the Peoples Temple evolved and how its practices oppressed its members. Journalist Shiva Naipaul tracked the Temple's history in *Journey to Nowhere*, so too did James Reston, Jr., in *Our Father Who Art in Hell*. Even more incisive is *Seductive Poison*, a memoir by Deborah Layton of her six years as a member of the Temple's inner circle, in which she describes in harrowing detail how her idealism was perverted into cultism and how her social personality was systematically destroyed.

Surely in the many thousands of hours of their research, the writers must have come across the material covered by these journalists and memoirists. The writers of *The People's Temple* clearly decided not to include these uglier aspects of the story. In its willfully open-minded tolerance, this show leaves us with the distinct impression that history has given the people of the Peoples Temple and even Jim Jones a very bad rap. It was only later, while doing additional reading in preparation to write this review, that I came to realize just how one-sided this portrait was.

Frankly, I felt snookered. In short, theirs is a generally sunny account of a gospel-singing, refreshingly multiracial, individually empowering community that collectively loses its way while trying to realize a shared utopian vision. *The People's Temple* strains to see all that was good about the Peoples Temple; but by strenuously omitting this cult's human horrors, what, at first, came across as a mildly tragic tale becomes, upon reflection, an event that someone less charitable might call a magnificently and stylishly produced whitewash.