

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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Photo by Elif Savas

Open Fist at Atwater Village Theatre

In complete and suitably spooky darkness in one of the Atwater Village's cavernous and naturally dank reclaimed warehouse spaces, scattered voices, sometimes bursting as primal screams, sometimes sounding off in harmony as a communal talking in tongues, call out from the grave in Open Fist's revival of John O'Keefe's 1981 award-winning one-act *Ghosts*.

Part of the company's *Rorschach Fest*, featuring three programs of short experimental works performed in rep and honoring playwrights renowned for pushing the boundaries of theatrical invention, O'Keefe's poetic conjuring of life in the afterlife proves the perfect entry to open the Fisters' 30th anniversary season.

Evoking a feeling of *Under Milk Wood* reinvented by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *Ghosts* features a dynamic troupe of arrestingly lionhearted actors whose expressive faces emerge in the frequent blackouts to tell their tales of dealing with death, something that hangs over the heads of many of us in the...er... dusk of our existence in this particular out of control spin around the sun.

From the legendary counter-culture goddess Tina Preston entering the stage leaning back on a hand truck pushed by fellow castmember Brian Bertone to Jan Munroe succumbing to the perpetual motion of an omnipresent rocking chair, alternately laughing hysterically and then instantly transforming into someone clearly tortured and frightened by the approaching unknown of his death, each actor in turn grabs our attention and makes his or her monologue something uniquely personal.

Under the innovative direction of the celebrated playwright himself, this welcome reinvention of a groundbreaking classic of avant-garde theatre will instantly and effectively transport anyone of a certain age—ergo mine, see—back a few decades to the days of La Mama and the Open Theater in New York and the Magic in San Francisco, the place where *Ghosts* debuted in 1981 before arriving in LA four years later to great acclaim.

The committed and conventionally-unbridled performances of Bertone, Cat Davis, Jeanine Venable, and the vocal calisthenics of Elif Savas periodically piercing the darkness, prove later generations have benefited greatly from the artistic freedom afforded by theatrical pioneers such as O’Keefe, yet this production fully belongs to its elders.

Preston culminates her years as an underground theatrical goddess in a touching portrait of someone lamenting a life lost before it was ready to be silenced and Munroe, particularly when clothed in a kid-style Halloween ghostly sheet with holes cut in for eyes, seems to defy age as he canonizes his early experiences in Parisian street performance art and training in the nearly lost techniques of mime with none other than Marcel Marceau.

Although it deals with the mystery and unknown fears of shuffling off our proverbial mortal coil, experiencing the resurrection of John O’Keefe’s *Ghosts* is akin to instantly tumbling back to the early days of the artistically brave and unstoppable Bay Area during the innovational advent of the Beat Generation; it’s not hard to picture this all unfolding in the back of City Lights performed alongside poetry readings by Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Mr. Ferlinghetti himself.

Personally, *Ghosts* made me want to go back to that time and relive all the promise and excitement such works generated as their intrepid creators opened the doors for a multitude of artists to arrive on scene after them.

Ironically, one thing the folks did not have back then was the occasional clickity-clack of the Amtrak trains that run directly behind this welcoming performance space, something that before this has never been an asset to anything presented at the complex. This time out, it adds to the eeriness, especially when Munroe’s abandoned rocker continued to rock in a lone spotlight just as a commuter train *whooshed* past behind it—an unintentional reminder that life goes on even after we all fade away into oblivion.

Joining *Ghosts*, referred to in Open Fist’s *Rorschach Fest* as “Inkblot A,” in their ambitious repertory event are *Landscape* by Harold Pinter and *Never Swim Alone* by Daniel Maclvor (“Inkblot C”), as well as *This is a Chair* and *Here We Go*, both by Caryl Churchill (“Inkblot C”).

THROUGH APR. 5: Open Fist at the Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Av., LA. 323.882.6912 or openfist.org
