

Strange School



ALEXANDER FRANCIS HORN AND SHARON GANS-HORN
Leaders of the Theatre of All Possibilities

Real-Life Drama In S.F. Theater Group

By Michael Taylor and Bernard Weiner

A strange San Francisco drama group has just closed its theater and its school at a time when some of its frightened ex-members have complained they were subject to a program of brainwashing and violence combined with the principles of two arcane Russian mystics.

The offbeat group is called the Theatre of All Possibilities, and until it closed — ostensibly for the holidays — it had staged its shows and operated its after hours self-improvement school at 150 Golden Gate Avenue in San Francisco.

Its leaders, Alexander Francis Horn and his wife, Sharon Gans-Horn, have left town, according to other active officials in the group.

Earlier this week, police and social welfare investigators heard allegations by ex-members and others close to the theater of beatings, child neglect and a student fee structure that reportedly yielded huge revenues for Horn's enterprise.

Weird Real-Life Theater Drama in S.F.

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The students have been mostly young persons who say they paid hundreds and in some cases thousands of dollars — almost always in cash — to learn how to discipline their personal lives through “intimidation” of each other, a technique based on the teachings of the esoteric Russian philosophers George Ivanovich Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky.

Reluctant for a long time to come forward, and still expressing fear for their safety, the students have told their stories to a San Francisco police inspector, a juvenile court probation officer, a city social worker and several reporters.

Their allegations include reports of:

- Beatings by theater officials when the students could not meet their required weekly quotas of selling dinner-show tickets to members of the public they confronted on the streets.

- Beatings and monetary fines of actors and students for making noise backstage, “whimpering,” falling asleep and other transgressions.

- Haranguing of poorer students to come up with the cash to pay for their classes while the Horns lived in a \$300,000-plus Pacific Heights home;

- Arranged marriages, pressures to produce offspring, and ordering couples to separate and divorce.

- Possible neglect of small children backstage at the theater, while their parents were busy rehearsing, acting or doing countless other chores. Police also are checking out an informal child-care center at 331 Bartlett street, in the Mission district, following reports of bruises and injuries of several of the children.

The theater’s attorney, Frederick Mindel, was asked to comment on the charges yesterday, but he said the theater would not comment and he himself was “too pressed” to discuss them.

Despite the allegations by the students, no known formal complaints have been filed with Bay Area law enforcement agencies.

The students say they thought the bizarre goings-on were all part of the learning process — a process bound up inextricably with their teachers’ interpretations of the disciplinary teaching of the two philosophers, Gurdjieff and Ouspensky.



The shuttered theater on Golden Gate avenue

Asked why they stayed with the theater group, students replied that the school filled a void in their lives, or that the discipline and long hours so completely wore them down that they had little will to think for themselves.

The essence of the training sessions, according to Kathleen Mandis, 29, was that “they kept telling us we were s— and so we finally came to believe it.”

Other students — who insisted on remaining anonymous — insisted they benefitted greatly from the disciplined approach and found nothing wrong with their experiences in the theater and school. Said one, who stayed with the Horns for several years: “It was the most hard, difficult experience of my life — and it cost me a lot, in many ways — but it was also

the richest experience of my life.”

The Horns’ names appear on few of the legal documents dealing with the theater.

On April 23, 1973, articles of incorporation for Everyman Inc. were filed with the California secretary of state. They listed Frederick Mindel, Martin Kahn and Lynne Scalapino as “the persons who are appointed to act as first directors.” Everyman is the name under which the theater operated, in the Mission district, before moving to the Tenderloin area.

Mindel is a 33-year-old San Francisco lawyer who told The Chronicle, in a letter last October, that he was simply “assisting the Theatre of All Possibilities, as a friend of the Theatre, in becoming properly introduced to the San Francisco theater community.”

The incorporation articles for Everyman say its primary purpose is "a theater for the performance of live stage productions, and to initiate, sponsor, promote, and carry out plans, policies and activities that will tend to further the prosperity and development of this theater and the theatrical arts."

Everyman's first production, before it changed its name to the Theatre of All Possibilities, was a four-hour play called "The Fantastic Arising of Padraic Clancy Muldoon," written by Horn. It starred his wife, Sharon Gans, an award-winning professional actress who had a featured role in the film "Slaughterhouse Five."

At the time Horn's play was produced, one local drama critic wrote in a review:

"In more than ten years of reporting on the local theater scene, I remember no more punishing experience ..." The critic left the performance at the end of Act II, after three hours.

During its years in the Mission district, the theater became well known because of the droves of ticket sellers who fanned out across San Francisco, stopping passersby and strongly urging them to buy tickets for dinners and shows.

Former student Mandis said that if there were 250 seats in the theater, by her estimate, "we were told that we had to sell 350 tickets."

But if only 200 seats were ultimately filled, despite the overbooking, one of the group leaders would hold a "ticket meeting" and harangue the ticket sellers, she said, by shouting at them to sell more.

At least a dozen times," Mandis said, she saw one theater official "slap or punch men" for not meeting their ticket quotas. Women, at that time, were not physically punished, she said.

Mandis said she was a student of the theater from October, 1975, until July, 1976. She made her allegations in a 2 1/2-hour tape-recorded session with police, social service officials and news reporters earlier this week.

She and other former students said potential students were invited to stay after a show and were then told — as Maurice Newman, 32, of Petaluma, said — that they could become part of a class that could "help us improve our lives."

Newman, Mandis and others said the initial fee was \$100, in cash, to be brought to the next meeting. The usual fee thereafter, they said, was \$200 per month.

When Mandis was in the group, she said, her class of married couples had about 50 people in it, each paying the \$200 a month, and a class of single students, with between 50 and 100 members, also paying \$200 a month.

By the most conservative estimates, the operation collected about \$20,000 a month from students and another \$20,000 from theater tickets.

Not counting the dinner tickets, this amounted to nearly \$500,000 a year.

But the theater and its operators had expenses:

After a fire gutted the Mission district theater in the fall of 1976, the Horns moved their operations to a new and as yet unbuilt theater in the Syufy building at 150-160 Golden Gate Avenue.

In November 1976, a knowledgeable financial source said, a five-year lease was signed with Syufy Enterprises, calling for a monthly rental of slightly more than \$2,000. The group then embarked on a two to three-month refurbishing project, estimated to have cost \$350,000. Most of the labor was volunteer.

The rental checks of more than \$2,000 a month, sources said, were drawn on a bank account of Total Theatre Inc., a California corporation formed Nov. 18, 1976, by Gregory Koch, Mike Hilsenrad and Mike Imlay, all of whom are listed on play programs and internal memoranda, obtained by The Chronicle, as members of the Theatre of All Possibilities.

Total Theatre's incorporation papers list the directors as Robert Klein, along with Hilsenrad and Mindel.

In early 1978, the California Department of Corporations listed Mindel on forms required for the issuance of stock in Total Theatre. So far, though, no stock appears to have been issued and the Horns' names do not appear on the incorporation papers according to officials.

But the Horns do have personal expenses which appear in documents on file in San Francisco City Hall.

In March, 1977, Alex Horn and Sharon Gans-Horn signed an agreement for a five-year lease at \$1,500 a month, on an 11-room house at 2050 Jackson street.

In a "tenant's personal and credit information" form, also on file with the lease agreement, Horn said he had an annual income of \$60,000, as a "teacher-director-writer."

He added that he was also "producer-director," and under the space for "name and title of superior," he wrote "none."

Efforts to reach the Horns for comment were unavailing. But those who are close to the theater said it is closed for the holidays and the Horns have left town.

"It's very iffy if they'll return," said Mark McIntire, who played the lead role in Horn's play "Adam King." "Alex and Sharon are frightened as hell, paranoid about the possibility of press reports linking them to another Jonestown in the making."

"I told them that leaving town with no comment would suggest guilt, but they felt that, be that as it may, the press accounts would simply cast a question mark over their operation and then it would all be over."

"Alex and Sharon are very good people," McIntire said, "who have never treated me with anything other than equanimity and kindness. They never tried to indoctrinate me or pressure me to join the classes."

Attorney Mindel said earlier this week, "There is nothing illegal, immoral or dangerous going on with regard to the theater. You and others like you in the press are engaged in irresponsible, reckless, vicious attempts to slander this theater and these people, putting their lives and their families' lives in danger."

Angus MacFarlane, a probation officer in Juvenile Court, told The Chronicle that he and police inspector Duane Otis have made preliminary inquiries into the group's informal child care center on Bartlett street.

Children were brought to the theater by parents who were working or studying there, Mandis said. But because of the lengthy work or study sessions, the children were not properly cared for, she said.

On the other hand, she added, "We were expected to get pregnant, and Sharon was always haranguing the women to have babies."

Mandis became pregnant in April, 1976, and left the theater that July. But her husband stayed, she said.

One of the theater rules, Mandis added was, "If your spouse leaves, you either go with him or her or you get divorced and remarry within a month, and students are ordered never to speak to ex-students." Mandis said she is now divorced.