

What are the answers to cultism?

By Jack Brooks

(For the past three months, my life has been much involved in an investigation of the defunct Theatre of All Possibilities. As a result of the investigation, the cult theatre has closed, and the leadership, along with many members, have left San Francisco. Latest reports put them in some remote area of Pennsylvania. The offices of Senator Alan Cranston, Assemblyman Art Agnos and Supervisor Carol Ruth Silver have expressed interest in looking further into the theatre group. Through the Progress articles and my KGO Radio reports, I have received a deluge of correspondence and information from all over the West and from as far away as Kentucky and New York. There are many questions. But what are the answers?)

Dr. Lee Sannella is currently a practicing ophthalmologist in the East Bay. He is also a licensed psychiatrist, with credentials from the Yale Medical School and Langley Porter and Napa Hospitals. In the mid-60's Sannella began participating in the Gurdjieff/Ouspensky movement. He heard that there was a "new teacher" in town. On a Sunday morning, in a home near UC Hospital, Dr. Lee Sannella met Alex Horn.

It was a meaningful meeting. As a result of it, Sannella, then a practicing psychiatrist, led many of his patients into Horn's Everyman Theatre (later to become the Theatre of All Possibilities). I asked him why?

"Alex Horn appeared to be a man

with a vision who wanted something better from life - something intrinsically religious - offered a connection to some-



Dr. Lee Sannella

thing higher - God, if you will, that could be formed without drugs and razzle-dazzle. Coupled with this 'mysticism,' Alex was an especially good actor. He could present, develop and sell any thesis."

Richard Mermin, a Marin County resident who claims to have been led to Horn "indirectly" through Sannella, still attributes his present life-fulfillment to Horn.

"Most of those I've talked with (other former 'students') share with me vivid recollections of moments that truly changed our lives. We may hold recriminations against Alex for his abuses and mistakes; some were real and serious, I'm convinced. But surely none would

want to return to their ways before those encounters. How many among the more productive persons in the Bay Area - hundreds, if not thousands - should, and do, acknowledge their time with Alex as the necessary preparation for their accomplishments since?"

I must note that Mermin is the only one of the "hundreds, if not thousands" who felt strongly enough, after my many appeals for persons who felt positively about Horn, to contact me, to do so. Sannella comments on Mermin's observations.

"I would question his numbers, but he is definitely right - to a point. People who were basically 'nobodies' didn't pose a threat to Horn. His treatment of them was, therefore, non-violent and benevolent. These people gained much from the experience. It was the stronger ones Horn needed to debase and destroy."

LIVING OUT THEATRICAL FANTASIES

Perhaps my strongest question about the holding power of Alex and Sharon Gans-Horn on their followers was answered when Dr. Sannella described a typical 'orgy' that Horn staged. Amidst bacchanalian exhibitions of dancing, entertainment and eating, Teacher Horn taught a parable.

"It all took place on a Sausalito houseboat. Everyone was in full evening dress and the boat was festooned in the most lavish way.

Each of us brought one hundred dollars in \$1 bills. There were gaming tables and the point was for everyone to gamble until one person won it all. The prize was \$10,000. There was the most elegant display of gourmet foods. There were specialty acts and jugglers. The party lasted for 36 hours. And all to illustrate what 'life is really like'. Where else could you get such parties?"

There were many such 'celebrations' to keep the 'students' enchanted. The ones with bonfires, nudity and sex were usually held at the Sonoma County ranch.

But parties weren't the only lure. Horn was a master at creating a pre-determined crisis and then solving it. This was one of the methods used in extracting large sums of money from the membership. In the creation of some fictitious crisis, Horn would often admit to general mistakes, so that the end result allowed him to demonstrate his self-corrective powers and approach to perfection. It is a method used by most cult masters.

A PSYCHIATRIST'S APPRAISAL OF ALEX HORN

What kind of a man can control every moment of the lives of his followers, dictate when and who they marry, extract large sums of money from them, and brutalize them psychologically and physically? Dr. Lee Sannella has strong and to the point answers, based on his own experiences and his professional training.

"The man is a coward. The day your story broke, he had a dental appointment. The dentist said that Horn came in with his tail between his legs, asking what he should do. The dentist is a friend of both Horn and myself. He said he'd never seen anyone so scared. Horn, and others of his type, live in a constant state of paranoia; real and imagined persecution haunts them. They pass the same syndrome onto their followers. That's why it was so easy for Horn to get them to sell up and leave town to join him."

What about Horn's appeal to intellectuals? Why were there so many professional people on his rosters?

Again, Sannella is firm in his analysis. "Horn was not an intellectual. He had little or no lineage as an Ouspensky/Gurdjieff teacher. But he had charisma and animal magnetism. He made that, and his version of the philosophy, work for him. That, and his salesmanship as an actor, impressed the Ph.D.s who joined him.

What about the deeper personality traits? The doctor had noted cowardice and a need to dominate, but did it go further than that?

"The violence, said Sannella, was employed to prove to himself that others shared the same weaknesses that he had. Some of your witnesses said that they never saw any violence toward women. I saw plenty. Horn hates women. His sexual use of them was a punishment, not a reward. I saw him strike one woman so hard, she hit a concrete floor and bloodied her head. His ploy of calling men in the group "homosexuals" and "impotent" indicates to me that the man feared or actually exhibited those traits himself, in himself."

It is illuminating, given the activities of the Theatre of All Possibilities, to note that Gurdjieff stated emphatically that "anything attained by violence is not to be countenanced." Several witnesses, including Dr. Sannella, have told of Horn followers who committed suicide. These cases were psychotics who, with proper medical attention, might have been saved. It can only be speculated to what extent leaders of the Everyman/Theatre of All Possibilities can be held accountable for these tragedies.

Sannella, himself, has been asked about his responsibility, as a doctor, in leading people into the group.

"The good that Horn propounded, like E.S.T. and others, was real. He had something to offer – until he got off the track and fell into his power trip. Unlike E.S.T., it wasn't a couple of weekends

deal. Horn's vision was pure fiction. On a short-term basis, it worked well. People benefited and beautiful things happened. But, in the long haul, Alex couldn't deliver. Then the ugliness set in. Fear and abuse became the adhesive. When that happened, I left, as did most of those who had joined with or through me."

WHO JOINS CULTS?

Observers of cults all agree that people with vision and purpose, those who have positive leadership abilities, have a definite contribution to make to the world. Paradoxically, those same attributes, misdirected, create monsters, like Jim Jones, and the susceptible followers become easy prey and victims. Why do they submit to such indignities and torment so willingly? According to Dr. Martin Orne, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania, "The cults demand work and commitment from individuals who may have never previously encountered a situation demanding commitment. Unfortunately, it is no longer necessary for young people to work for the common good of the family's well-being and survival."

Herein seems to be the need to discover a substitute "family" unit (The Theatre of All Possibilities) and surrogate mothers (Sharon Gans-Horn), fathers (Alex Horn) and brothers and sisters (members of 'the school').

Dr. Sannella agrees with Dr. Orne and goes even further. "We live in desperate times. Many who have come to that realization are filled with despair. They are searching for anything that offers 'hope' and a 'better' way. They are prepared to submit to even more desperate means in order to reach the 'answer.' Our society is so permissive and lacking in deep-rooted personal values that the tyrants have had an easy time; Hitler, Charles Manson, Jim Jones, and on a lesser scale, Alex and Sharon Gans-Horn. They were just beginning. It might have gone much further."