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## Hoyle delivers delicious 'Feast'

Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic

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**A FEAST OF FOOLS: Comedy.** Created and performed by Geoff Hoyle. Directed by Richard Seyd. (Through Feb. 16. At the Marines Memorial Theatre, 609 Sutter St. , San Francisco. 95 minutes. Tickets \$25-\$45. Call (877) 771-6900 or visit [www.marinesmemorialtheatre.com](http://www.marinesmemorialtheatre.com)).

Great comedy comes in many forms. Geoff Hoyle's form just happens to be one of the most masterly, evocative and downright hilarious.

"A Feast of Fools," the comic banquet Hoyle and musical sidekick Gina Leishman are performing in a much-too-brief three-week run at the Marines Memorial Theatre, is more than a case in point. It's 95 minutes of superb physical comedy punctuated by delightful musical mayhem and leavened with poignant, unspoken reflections on the human condition.

None of this will come as any surprise to Hoyle's deservedly large body of local fans. Much of the material in the "Feast" that opened Monday at the Marines will be familiar from earlier solo shows -- particularly "The Fool Show," which he performed in various forms and venues throughout the '80s (including an engagement at the Marines in '89 using the title "Feast of Fools"). A few routines derive from shows Hoyle developed in the '90s at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre with director Tony Taccone.

They all seem as fresh as ever in the skillful immediacy of Hoyle's execution. In some cases, they even feel more mature. At 56, Hoyle may no longer be able to go to quite the extremes of physical comedy he could in his youth -- as in a Mr. Sniff routine with a violin and a recalcitrant music stand that dates back to his years clowning with Bill

Irwin in the early Pickle Family Circus. Instead, he's developed an even greater economy in his always masterful use of eloquent gesture and expression.

Not that there's a lack of physical exertion in "Feast." The orange-banana-nosed Mr. Sniff gets embroiled in a stubborn chair and tangled in the theater curtain. Hoyle's classic "Two Waiters" sketch -- with its brilliantly spare character studies in arrogant showboating and insubordinate ineptitude -- climaxes in an astonishing quick-change battle. The great three-legged dance that closes the show is a marvel of fancy footwork, especially considering that the man who performs it has three feet.

But Hoyle can be every bit as impressive, and hilarious, with a simple shift of his eyes or the extension of an inquisitive, exploratory finger -- as he is in "An Unfortunate Situation," standing still with a wary expression in a long trench coat that turns out to harbor mysteriously malevolent hands. He achieves some of his most sublime comedy as a medieval-style jester merely exchanging glances with what appears to be (but isn't) a carved wooden head on a stick (an old-fashioned fool's bauble).

Developed last summer by Hoyle, Leishman and director Richard Seyd at the La Jolla Playhouse, and reshaped and revised since, "Feast" is a different venture for Hoyle in another respect. It's his first completely silent comedy show. Silent, that is -- except for sound effects -- on his part. And except for the sublimely comic music -- on piano, accordion, a wailing and popping saxophone and a melodious glass armonium -- performed by Leishman, who also growl-croons a delectably whiskey-voiced decadent "Falling Apart Again" a la Dietrich.

Seyd -- a noted director at the Eureka ("Cloud Nine"), Berkeley Rep ("Collected Stories," "The Beauty Queen of Leenane") and American Conservatory ("Pygmalion," "Oleanna") theaters -- conceived the nonverbal format as a way of showcasing Hoyle's skills for the widest possible audience (with hopes of touring it internationally, starting -- if

all goes according to plan -- in Edinburgh and London). It falls just a little fine-tuning short of a perfect greatest hits anthology.

Leishman proves a superb comic foil as well as an inspired composer of the humorous accompanying score and a brilliant "orchestra of one." In her elegant black satin gown (costumes by Mary Larson), she supports and footnotes Hoyle with wide-eyed Imogene Coca-like elastic expressions, periodically taking refuge in passionate attacks on the Moonlight Sonata or the martinis she concocts from her well-stocked, cleverly disguised liquor cabinet.

One sketch, an inept-magician routine involving a bit of audience participation, doesn't quite measure up. Though expertly performed and at times quite funny, it isn't as original or well-constructed as the rest of the material. A poignant "The Widower's Rendezvous" -- Chaplinesque in its blend of comedy and sentiment as a widower prepares to return to dating -- needs only to be better framed within the progression of acts.

Such lapses are soon forgotten at a "Feast" this rich. When Hoyle performs his "The Four Ages" -- a beautifully articulated mimetic dance of a life span, from the womb through infancy, childhood, romance, fatherhood, aging and release from care -- the audience is in the hands of a master craftsman.

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