

One-act dramas open at AnNam

By Julia E. S. Spencer

If William Shakespeare were a Texan, would he be known as Cowboy Bill? This is just one reflection suggested by local actor/director/playwright Robbie Taylor's "Texas Voices," which premiered with another one-act drama, "Self-Portrait," at AnNam Tea House Tuesday.

"Voices" is a collection of monologues, performed by Taylor and six other talented local actors, and loosely connected with commentary by down-home philosopher and bard aficionado Cowboy Bill, played by George Weir. Bill's introductory monologue made some good points about how people discriminate against those of us whose accents are less than Shakespearean - and by the same token - those who deviate from the "norm" in race, religion or sexual persuasion. Bill then offered us a new perspective on Texas and Texans in the form of seven rather unusual and unorthodox characters.

The ensuing monologues achieved varying degrees of success. All showcased Taylor's rather sardonic, extremely verbal wit and his ability to get a handle on the foibles and expressions which make an individual unique. The frequent humor of the pieces was certainly very entertaining, but the

conclusions drawn often seemed rather fuzzy and, with a few exceptions, the insights a bit trite.

Taylor's interpretations of his own material were energetic and his characterizations of a trigger-happy cop in "Robocop" and of a country-wisdom-spouting drag queen in "Miss Thing" were dead-on. These bits were good for some comic riffing a la Robin Williams, and some commentary on urban law enforcement cowboys and the importance of not hiding behind a facade.

"Polyhymnia," performed by Anna Barron, was a look at the ways music can become an extension of a person's character and a common ground for bringing a family together. The idea was good, but the expression was a bit awkward and could use some fleshing out.

Charles Pitman's turn as a tax-dodging Jimmy Swaggart-type evangelist in "Reverend Jim" was hilariously apt, appropriately craven and hypocritical, and had the audience in stitches. Hearing the preacher's rationale for his actions (the IRS is Satan) was clever, but this material has been covered before on Saturday Night Live and numerous talk shows.

"The Lover," a longish monologue about a young man's various romantic encounters was witty and observant, and was also an

audience-pleaser. After recounting a dozen failed relationships, actor Tommy Newkirk concluded that any attempts at being "sensitive and caring" were misguided and that women really wanted John Wayne. Newkirk was fine in the role, but his irresistibly dimpled smile made it hard to believe he was having trouble getting dates.

"Panhandle Hiker," portrayed by Jessica Lowe, was a few minutes in the life of a frustrated hitchhiker as she thumbed for a ride and dispensed salty wit and wisdom, concluding that people who know how to take care of each other are a dying breed.

"Second Childhood," a piece about a transplanted Scotsman learning to cope with the heat and frequent provinciality of Texas demonstrated the beauty of casting to type, since actor John Cairney is himself Scottish. His evolution from resentment at constantly being defined by his accent to coming to terms with the people and climate and even defending them, was eminently realistic and credible. Some nice points were also made about identity and belonging, tying in with the Cowboy Bill's reassuring closing comments about how people's similarities are always more numerous than their differences.

"Self Portrait," the one-act play that followed the intermission, was

more consistent and coherent, and gave the actors more time to acquaint us with their characters. Done as a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards illustrating the life of the artist, it is billed as a "self portrait that takes place in the mind of the artist as he searches for the proper image of himself." Lou (Newkirk) is the main character, a would-be comic book illustrator struggling with his need for artistic expression while trying to please a tyrannical, often irrational father, and afraid of repeating with his own wife the hostility of his parents' marriage.

Various scenes illuminate key points in his life, and slowly reveal the often painful conflicts which are pulling him in opposite directions. The actors' portrayals are very convincing, even within the limits of the stylized direction and minimalist staging. Charles Pitman is terrific as the boorish, henpecked father who cannot accept his son's artistic leanings, or understand his vivid imagination. Jessica Lowe is plenty shrill as Lou's shrewish mother, and George Weir displays an effective mix of resignation and resentment as Lou's gay uncle who must endure the insults of his brother-in-law. Anna Barron displays talent as Lou's long-suffering wife. Cairney also provides expert support as Lou's friend/manager, Lee.



SONDRA N. ROBBINS/The Battalion

Robbie Taylor, dressed as a woman, performs "Miss Thing" from "Texas Voices" at AnNam Tea House Tuesday night.

Scenes where Lou is trying to choose between pleasing his father and pleasing himself and where Lee comes to announce a tragedy were wrenchingly real, extremely affecting and very believable. The father's blustery, pathetically macho character recalled Willy Loman in "Death of a Salesman," and while the play isn't

very long, it does a good job of portraying three-dimensional characters.

Although there were a few rough edges, future performances promise to be more polished. Performances will be Tuesday and Wednesday of next week at 8 and 8:30 p.m. respectively at the Tea House.

Local artist contributes talents to workshop for beginning artists

By Yvonne Salce

Surrounded by a group of overzealous 5-year-old girls and the shrill but enthusiastic sound of their chatter, Maruta Kajaks-Grots can't help but wonder if all this is just a coincidence or good karma.

"I need your signature on it," says Kajaks-Grots in a soft-spoken voice to one of the girls. "Put your name on it," she adds warmly, while looking over the child's artwork, a positive and negative image produced through black-and-white drawing techniques, or as Kajaks-Grots puts it "an image of reality and fantasy created on magic paper."

Maybe it was just a matter of sending her resume to the right place at the right time. With her husband working on his Ph.D. here at Texas A&M and Kajaks-Grots working as an associate professor of arts and humanities and as head of the art department at West Shore Community College in Scottville, Mich., she sent her resume to the Arts Council of Brazos Valley in hopes of spending the summer with her husband.

The fact that the Arts Council was looking for an experienced artist to restructure their summer art program seemed too coincidental. And the fact that the summer art program meant working with children, a passion Kajaks-Grots has always had, put the professional artist right at home. Immediately she was taken in as the Art Council's artist-in-residence. Later Kajaks-Grots and her husband, both Latvian and fluent in the language, discovered they could serve as translators for the Texas Music Festival, who plan to feature the Latvian Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra.

For Kajaks-Grots, guiding students to discover their own artistic talents, whether they be children or adults, is all the same.

"The magic and the 'awe' of wanting to see results is not limited to age," says Kajaks-Grots. "Obviously they are on different levels, but the immediate reaction is the same. There's that same 'spark in the eye' reaction."

"Everyone starts with a single blank sheet of paper and pencil. It's what you do with it that's different."

Kajaks-Grots believes you are never too old or too young to start learning art. The important thing, she says, is that you start.

As overseer of the Arts Council's "Summer Art Spectacular," a series of art classes for all ages, Kajaks-Grots will instruct an adult class entitled "Portrait Drawing for Beginners." Working from photographs of family and friends, Kajaks-Grots will guide students through the basic techniques of charcoal portraiture.

"It doesn't matter if you haven't drawn before; the technique I teach covers all the basics first. Then we learn to customize those skills, making it into a portrait," Kajaks-Grots explains.

Kajaks-Grots says her class is also for the person who has a little experience because of the feedback and interaction that results. Much like a child's amazement, there is that "Hey look at what I did" type of response, she says.

Oftentimes adults may be apprehensive about taking an art class because of the fear of being ridiculed or criticized.



RICHARD S. JAMES/The Battalion

Local artist Maruta Kajaks-Grots teaches children's art classes offered through the Brazos Valley Arts Council. Her own handiwork decorates the walls of her apartment.

"To dare to expose yourself is a frightening thing," she says.

She understands self-consciousness, and stresses that students need to learn to start from the bottom and work their way up. She works with each student on a one-to-one basis, never expecting the student to draw her way, but rather helping that student develop his or her own skill. Yet, she doesn't deny that art puts one in a vulnerable position.

"Being an artist and showing your work in public is like raising your skirt and hoping you remembered to put on underwear that morning. You won't know until it happens."

It is that same kind of boldness and unexpectedness that Kajaks-Grots uses in her own artwork. Being a working artist herself, primarily with watercolors but always open to different media, she uses nature-oriented abstractions, such as plants, flowers, clouds and

landscapes.

"Nature is power," says Kajaks-Grots. "Just look at an abandoned building and how it is eventually overtaken by leaves. Look at the sidewalk and how grass is forcing its way through the cracks."

"I don't have flowers in vases. I concentrate on that flower and how it is growing. Is it bending, plopping over or dying?"

On the outside it may look like a pretty picture, but deeper into the picture lies a twist and a point about nature. Kajaks-Grots' reverence and respect for nature is apparent. Her work tends to be forceful and bold, but at the same time exhibits a sensuality, strong but gentle in contradiction. Her ideas come from nature, its powers and her acknowledgement of that power.

See ARTIST/Page 6

Texas Music Fest continues with Pro Arte Quartet

By Timm Doolen

Four artists at the top of their form, all working towards one musical goal. That was the scene at Rudder Theater Monday night when the Pro Arte Quartet played three classical compositions as part of the ongoing Texas Music Festival.

Norma Paula and Jae Kim on violin, Parry Karp on cello and Richard Blum on viola were all in fine form as they played selections by Ernest Bloch, Jean Sibelius and Antonin Dvorak.

The quartet opened with Bloch's "Two Pieces for String Quartet," in two movements, which in all honesty was musically a little harsh for my tastes.

The quartet next settled into the more palatable "Intimate Voices" in five movements by Sibelius.

After the intermission, Lawrence Wheeler on viola joined the players to make a quintet, finishing the perfor-

mance with the four movements of Dvorak's "Quintet No. 3 in E-Flat."

The Pro Arte Quartet is currently celebrating its 50th anniversary as the oldest ensemble of its kind and was the first string quartet to establish residency at an American university, the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

Next Monday the Latvian Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra, directed by Tovi Lifshitz, will take the stage to play pieces by Mozart, Dmitri Shostakovich, Peteris Vasks and Bla Bartk. The orchestra is from Riga, Latvia, USSR, and performs regularly in the Soviet Union.

The following week, the Symphonic Brass Quintet from the University of Houston School of Music will perform in Rudder Theater.

Tickets are \$8 for non-students and \$5 for students per performance. More information can be obtained from the MSC Box Office at 845-1234.

AnNam plans friendly 'Battle of the Bands'

By Jeffrey Brown

Local bands will showcase their talents on Friday and Saturday nights at AnNam Tea House's first-ever "Battle of the Bands" - that is, a peaceful battle of the bands.

The gathering will include a variety of musical styles, from solo acoustic guitar to reggae to heavy metal to pop-rock.

"The battle of the bands is not a competition; it is a group of bands who want to help support the tea house," T.C. Nguyen, proprietor of AnNam Tea House, said.

The idea is to attract several local bands together and to have a good time, not just to win a contest, Nguyen said.

"The bands are not interested in money or prizes," Nguyen said. "They just want to get together and play."

Even though winning is not the goal of the shows, the so-called best of each night will be awarded prizes. The grand prize

will be four to six hours of recording time at Airplay Studios in Bryan. Depending upon the attendance for the two days' festivities, AnNam will possibly award four to six more hours of recording time at Airplay. Winners will be determined by two judges and, of course, by the audience's response.

Brian Gutowski of Black Mass, one of the bands scheduled to perform, said to call the event a battle was a misnomer because of the variety of music styles.

"It is impossible to say that one group is better than another because the styles are different," Gutowski said. "It's (the contest is) just to give the groups some good exposure."

Christy Claxton of Dream Horse, another performing act, said that she sees the battle of the bands as a good chance to check out some of the new local acts.

See ANNAM/Page 6