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The Pickle Family Carries On

By Steven Winn

Chronicle Staff Critic

After an arresting opening that grows from Doug McKechnie's pre-curtain rain forest soundscape to a picturesque journey of shadow puppets across designer Barbara Mesney's mountain terrain, Larry Pisoni's dialogue-free production rattles through a series of acts stacked up like cards in a deck. Some of the acts—the sinuous ripples of snakeskin-clad contortionist Zhoe Yue, the spirited flights of flying ring performers Montana Miller and Jens Larson in Beaver Bauer's richly silly bird costumes festooned with skirts of hopping blue feathers—speak for themselves.

The moon and stars that twinkle over the set's jagged mountains serve as unintended reminders that the fates have dealt the Pickles more than their share of losses in '91. Had the gods concurred, this show would have served as William Ball's directorial return to San Francisco five years after his stormy departure from the American Conservatory Theater. Ball died over the summer.

Gone on to other things are Pickle co-founder and longtime director Peggy Snider (to whom this production is dedicated), artistic director Judy Finelli, and Joan Mankin, whose Queenie Moon clown character has greatly enlivened the Pickle scene for the past few years. A Saturday afternoon teeterboard mishap even knocked Jay Laverdure off the opening night bill.

But on the show goes, of course, with its daringly understated opening. As the gushing rains in McKechnie's soundscape give way to piping birdcalls and Amazon chattering, the curtain opens on an empty, silent stage. As Kurt Landisman's lighting gradually turns night to gray dawn, a troupe of lightly drumming trekkers appears on a distant slope. They grow larger and louder as they cross ridges of hills, eventually arriving onstage as the company—including a human giraffe—beating out their infectious polyphony on drums of various sizes.

Costumer Bauer threads a tropical motif through the show. The pole climbers, led by a beaming Huang Zhen, are outfitted as capering monkeys for the Act I closer. The teeterboard ensemble, in another witty touch, does their leaps and flips as bug-eyed frogs in Day-Glo skins.

Juggler Cindy Marvell makes five white balls dance and bubble, in mid-air and bounced off a round platform. Yue's snaky "pagoda of bowls" features several moves with the bowls balanced on the bottom of an upturned foot that calmly taunt the logical

limits of body flexibility. Larson's effortless upper arm strength and Miller's agility on the rings are a second act high point.

Clown Pino (Diane Wasnak) skitters around in a purple morning coat. Her clown partner Jeff Raz is done up as a 19th century Venetian in brim hat and thick black mustache. Wasnak, a weird fringe of hair plastered to her white forehead above a perpetually dazed expression, is a skittering force field of comic energy with Raz and Laura Pape as occasional accomplices. Wasnak is a great ensemble clown, feeding off the other performers.

PICKLE FAMILY CIRCUS:

Family entertainment. Conceived by Larry Pisoni. Directed by Lu Yi and Larry Pisoni. (Palace of Fine Arts. Through January 4.)