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STAGE WEEK

Reza Abdoh: Meditation on 'Minamata'

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Corporate greed and environmental pollution are the targets of playwright Reza Abdoh in "Minamata," opening Friday at the Los Angeles Theatre Center.

"Minamata is the name of a fishing village in Japan," said the writer-director ("Peep Show," "Eva Peron," "Rusty Sat on a Hill One Dawn and Watched the Moon Go Down"), who wrote the piece with Mira-Lani Oglesby. "Chisso, a company that makes parts for plastic, dumped mercury waste into the water supply and the fishermen got sick. A high percentage of the villages depended on fish and fishing so their livelihoods dried up too.

"The story of Minamata is just the departure point for the play," the writer said. "It's the ghost behind the play, the shadow over it. The piece is a meditation on beliefs, ways of thinking, how operatives in the system create a way of thinking that makes it possible to destroy life in order to improve it. There's a thesis that in order to progress you have to allow for destruction. No. You cannot buy into that way of thinking, because it's erroneous and hurtful."

Abdoh rejects the notion of "linear" theater: "The world is not a linear world. We don't go from point A to B to C and end up at point Z," he said. "The whole point of the 19th Century is that we were drowning in rationalism. I celebrate irrationalism. Our problem is we repress flights of fancy."

And if the flights are obscure?

"I don't think it's an artist's place to describe his or her work," Abdoh said firmly. "After a while, the work takes over anyway, and you have nothing to do with it. I don't want my work to be understood--because if it's understood, it's forgotten. It needs to be *experienced*; if you experience, you retain a seed. We're always trying to (understand) things: 'How do you do that?' Well, you just experience it. And hopefully at the end of your life you have a distance on it: 'Oh, *that's* what it was. Now, onward.'"

SWITCHING CHANNELS: In Jackson Hughes' one-man show, "Our Man in Nirvana" (at Theatre/Theater), Hughes plays fictional German microbiology student Hans-Georg Ganzmann. "He's on a world tour, presenting his research findings," said the actor. "Everything goes fine till he finds himself in California, where he's possessed by entities who have all this knowledge he doesn't have. So he decides to give public demonstrations of trance channeling."

Among the visiting personae: Puerto Rican fashion designer Louie Hernandez, ballerina Simone de Veuve, porno star Butch Street, surfer Bud Beach and the blue-blooded Wedgewood Catheter. "We think of Germans as cold, scientific, analytical," Hughes said of his protagonist. "But Germany is the mother of romanticism--a cousin, in my mind, to American transcendentalism. And New Age is the descendant of that tradition: of (uniting) the split between spirit and body, life and death. I think ultimately we're very mysterious."

CRITICAL CROSS FIRE: George Bernard Shaw's "You Never Can Tell" and Charles Dickens' "Hard Times" are playing at South Coast Repertory.

In *The Times*, Don Shirley said of "You Never Can Tell": "Despite the snappy comebacks and bursts of temper that dot the dialogue, it remains a gentle play. Furthermore, it lacks the philosophical tirades that crop up in Shaw's later work. There isn't an ounce of preachiness here. . . . The performances glitter."

From Thomas O'Connor in the *Orange County Register*: "(Director) David Emmes has pumped just enough nitrous oxide into his staging to induce a giddy, airy sensation of floating--like the lacy fabric clouds that scud over Cliff Faulker's impeccable idealistic settings."

Said the *Daily News*' Daryl H. Miller: "The talented cast members contribute outstanding individual performances that blend together into a first-rate ensemble effort. I.M. Hobson warms hearts as the wry and spry waiter."

Moving on to "Hard Times," Don Shirley found it "a triumph of the imagination. Adapter Stephen Jeffreys spurned the scenic detail and enormous casts of the Dickens movies. Instead, he relied on our ability to imagine--that five actors were really 19 wonderfully varied characters, that an almost bare stage was really a grimy armpit of the Industrial Revolution."

The *Register*'s O'Connor disagreed: "The pocket adaptation is well and vigorously acted, arrestingly designed, musically lush and thoughtfully staged. It's also something of a chore--as if . . . we've been doing laps around the track for 3 hours and 50 minutes."

Said the *San Diego Union*'s Welton Jones: "The flashy stuff begins to evaporate as the story emerges. . . . The songs, ponderous and intrusive even when acceptably sung, gradually disappear as the great heft of Dickens' art crowds out the fancy notion of his interpreters."

Drama-Logue's Richard Scaffidi questioned the use of masks, "which are individually wonderful but worn somewhat randomly, yet overall this is a classy little package. Most astonishing is the fancy footwork and quick-change artistry of the ensemble."

And from Tom Jacobs in the *Daily News*: "One leaves this nearly four-hour play with the same feeling of exhilaration one experienced walking out of the eight-hour Royal Shakespeare Company production of 'Nicholas Nickleby'. . . . There is an almost childlike joy to his production--and a childlike sense of imagination."

