

## Comic actor's challenging body of work

### Geoff Hoyle bicycles around town to gear up for rigors of physical comedy in 'Feast of Fools'

Dave Ford, Chronicle Staff Writer

Tuesday, January 28, 2003



Comic actor Geoff Hoyle looked like a free man as he glided effortlessly along Shotwell Street on Wednesday morning, a cool, gray San Francisco day.

His compact body sat astride Rocinante, his 10-year-old Trek bike named for Don Quixote's trusty steed in the classic 1605 Miguel de Cervantes novel. He was covering the 3 miles from his outer Church

Street home to the Marines Memorial Theatre on Sutter Street, to rehearse his retooled greatest-hits show "Feast of Fools," which opened Monday. (He first performed a precursor, "The Fool Show," in 1988.)

A creator of precisely physicalized characters, Hoyle navigated city traffic with careful cool and the ready quip.

"Rather than dashing to work, I wend my way through the streets so I can take in the sights," he says, a slight British accent tinging his words even after 30 years here. "There's a lot you don't see, and certainly a lot you don't smell, when you ride in a car."

Aside from his theater work, with its physical basis in mime and facial mugging, bicycling is Hoyle's main form of exercise: He huffs and puffs up to Twin Peaks a few times a week. He says it soothes aging's irritating aches.

"Riding a bike actually helps my lower back," says Hoyle, 56. That's the only body area that gives him trouble -- remarkable for a performer with a 30-year history of pratfalls and general corporeal malfeasance.

"The irony of the body is that when you're young, you have tons of energy but don't know what you want to say," Hoyle says. "When you figure out what you have to say, you don't have the means. It's that cross-fade."

Still, he adds, "You don't have to pretend to be Baryshnikov. You can be Michael Caine, and that's a lot easier."

Not to say Hoyle's work is any less ferocious. On Thursday, he worked up a fine sweat as the failed magician Hoylo, the haughty and careless restaurant servers in "The Two Waiters" and The Fool, who gallantly dances with a skeleton. Still, in life as in great theater, living is about dying, and death is about endings -- something particularly poignant to performers who rely on theatrical athleticism.

"This is incredibly physical, and Geoff can only do it so long," says

"Feast" director Richard Seyd, 55, who has worked with Hoyle off and on since both immigrated separately to America from Britain in the 1970s. "And it would be tragic if it got lost."

To that end, Hoyle and Seyd plan to take "Feast" -- which is premiering (and debugging) in San Francisco for a limited run -- to the Edinburgh International Festival in August, and are negotiating a London run after that. They hope to tour the show globally, then, if the gods smile -- and financial backing appears -- to make a "Feast" concert film.

The show boasts the addition of composer, musician and expatriate Brit Gina Leishman, who wrote the music when she and Hoyle first rehearsed for a La Jolla run last summer. In addition to playing various instruments (mainly piano), she plays "straight man" -- her term -- to Hoyle, in character as an increasingly drunk accompanist.

She adds depth to the show, indeed, but also serves to offer Hoyle (and the audience) breaks in the manic action -- something Hoyle's not sure he likes.

"It's like waiting for the next train," he says. "But maybe I'm off the wall. . . . I don't want it to be exhausting to watch, and in the past, it has been."

In conversation, at least with the press, Hoyle ranges easily in and out of character. He has less manic energy than Robin Williams but is ever ready to drop into a dead-on John Lennon or Cockney lorry driver. Thinning hair rises like tall wheat from his angular dome; his face, with its thin-lipped mouth and agile blue eyes, never quite seems at rest.

Born and raised in Hull, an industrial fishing port, Hoyle was an early showoff and high school class clown. After receiving a degree in theater arts and English literature from Birmingham University, he moved to Paris. He taught English language and phonetics at the Sorbonne, studied mime under Etienne Decroux -- Marcel Marceau's teacher -- and performed street theater against the backdrop of the 1968 student

riots.

As a member of a community arts troupe in London a few years later, Hoyle met Mary, now his wife of 30 years (they have three children: Jonah, 25, Daniel, 22, and Kailey, 18).

The couple moved to America in 1973, soon landing in San Francisco. Hoyle helped form the New Depression Follies, a street theater troupe. Next, he ran away with the circus -- the storied Pickle Family Circus, with which he toured for eight years.

He has since performed with Cirque du Soleil and in local theater at American Conservatory Theater, Berkeley Repertory Theater and the Eureka Theatre. Solo shows such as "The Convict's Return" and "The First Hundred Years" have won international plaudits, and Hoyle created the role of Zazu in the original Broadway production of "The Lion King" in 1998.

His luck on the big screen has been less consistent. He acted with Robin Williams in Robert Altman's oddball 1980 "Popeye" (Hoyle's son Daniel was born on the set in Malta), and, alas, in the 1990 "Spirit of '76" with no less a leading light than David Cassidy.

"It's my breakthrough role," Hoyle quips. "I haven't appeared in a movie since."

Nonetheless, Hoyle works constantly -- "The aphorism 'Once an actor, always a waiter' fortunately doesn't apply to me" -- and only reluctantly takes a moment to ponder what it would mean to stop.

"It's a frightening thought," he says, his eyes softening with sadness. "There's always death. That's the knife edge, the juice, the high-wire act."

Then his eyes narrow slyly, and he adds, "Of course, I'm not that good at heights. I'm much better falling on the ground."

## Theater

FEAST OF FOOLS plays at 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Saturdays and 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. Sundays through Feb. 16 at the Marines Memorial Theatre, 609 Sutter St. (at Mason Street), San Francisco. Tickets: \$25-\$45. Call (877) 771-6900 or visit [www.tickets.com](http://www.tickets.com). Group discounts available at (415) 346-7805. For more information, visit [www.marinesmemorialtheatre.com](http://www.marinesmemorialtheatre.com).

*E-mail Dave Ford at [dford@sfchronicle.com](mailto:dford@sfchronicle.com).*

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2003/01/28/DD143188.DTL>

This article appeared on page **D - 1** of the San Francisco Chronicle

© 2003 Hearst Communications Inc. | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [RSS Feeds](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Contact](#)