

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

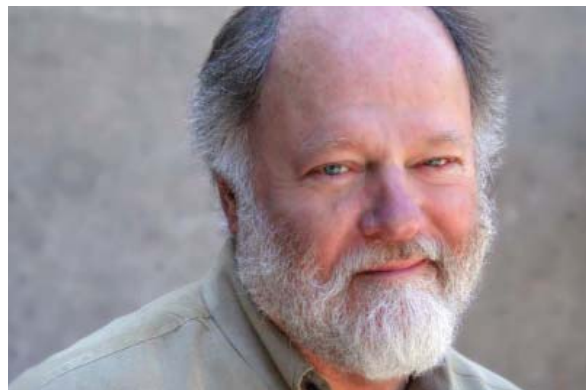
INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

THE MUSIC OF PICKLES

An Interview with Composer/Musician Randy Craig about *Scapin*

BY DAN RUBIN

It is the week before rehearsals for *Scapin* begin, and two old friends are sitting alone in a rehearsal studio with their scripts. Director/actor/clown Bill Irwin and composer/musician Randy Craig—who were both members of the Pickle Family Circus in the 1970s—are surveying the play’s dramatic landscape, looking for places where words and movement will not be enough to fully express the play’s comedic potential. “We’re going through and saying, ‘We need some music here,’” explains Craig, “and asking, ‘What does this moment here need?’”



Scapin composer/musician Randy Craig

Craig joined the San Francisco Mime Troupe in 1969—not as a musician, but as an actor. “In those days,” he recalls, “you had to do everything.” As soon as the

troupe found out he had been taking piano lessons all his life and had, along the way, picked up folk guitar and banjo, they made him a composer. Since then, Craig has created between 40 and 50 musicals for the Mime Troupe, the Pickle Family Circus, and performance-oriented educational programs around the Bay Area.

For *Scapin*, Craig is teaming up with percussionist Keith Terry, the founding artistic director of the International Body Music Festival and another former Pickle. “We don’t know if there will be body percussion in the show yet,” Craig smiles. “I had this idea that we might put it in the curtain-call dance, but I don’t know if that is going to happen.”

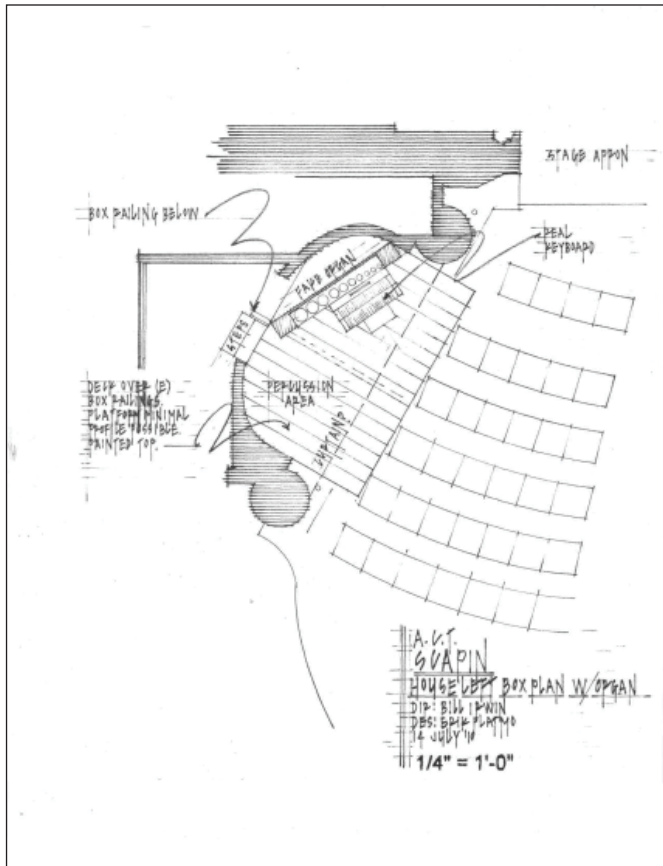
We caught up with Craig after an early rehearsal to ask him about what goes into creating music for this whirlwind comedy and about his time with the Pickle Family Circus.

ARE YOU WRITING ANY OF THE MUSIC BEFORE REHEARSAL BEGINS, OR ARE YOU DOING IT ALL IN THE ROOM?

I’ve already written basic character themes and a main dance.

THE CHARACTERS HAVE THEMES?

Some of them do. Hyacinth and Nerine each have one, and the fathers have “The Nasty Old Man Theme.” And then there’s this dance called “The Schemer’s Boogie,” which *Scapin* and Sylvestre do when they decide to conspire against the fathers and take their money, which is the plot of the play, more or less.



Scenic plans for the placement of the fake organ in *Scapin*, by set designer Erik Flatmo

one act. Michael Ohta was one of the roustabouts in the circus, the rigger. His uncle was Pete Seeger, so Pete came to the show. I'm on the bandstand playing the piano, reach down for the banjo to play the act, and I look across the way and I see him and think, "Oh my god: I'm going to play the banjo in front of Pete Seeger." It was a high time.

More than anything, I think the nicest thing about being part of the Pickles was the relationship with the community. We got to know people up and down the West Coast, and I'm still in touch with some of them. That was really neat. The band would often, after the show, go into the local bar and play a gig. That was always fun.

WHAT ARE YOU MOST EXCITED ABOUT FOR SCAPIN?

The cast is terrific, and the kind of work we are going to be doing with them is what I am really excited about. People ask, "Have you written the score?" and I tell them that I've written what I can write in front of the show, but a lot of it is going to be written as we rehearse—in a one-to-one, give-and-take kind of situation. That's really neat. I really like working that way. I have a lot of experience working that way, and Bill's really good at it. Part of what we've been doing in the last couple of meetings is going through the script, as I said, and noting moments, but also saying, "Well, this moment is something we'll work out when we get there. We're going to need something there, but we won't know what it is until we work with the actors and go back and forth." That's really a terrific way to work. It's not like when the composer brings in a score and goes away and maybe

see anybody remotely like that clown. Well it turns out it was Bill, and that's when I met him.

YOU DIDN'T RECOGNIZE HIM BECAUSE WILLY THE CLOWN IS SO DIFFERENT FROM BILL THE PERSON?

Well, in the first place, he had had full clown makeup on: a red fright wig and a big red nose. But even so . . . Bill is a quiet, reserved guy. Not flamboyant. He can be onstage, but personally he's not someone from whom you would expect Willy the Clown.

HOW LONG DID YOU STAY WITH THE PICKLES?

Seven years: '74 to '81. First we started out only a couple months, and then we got to the point that it was almost a year-long season, so I did a lot of shows with those people, in a lot of places. We went to London, did a month or six weeks at the Roundhouse theater there during a British rail strike and the heaviest snowfall in a hundred years. That was an experience. There are millions of stories. Celebrities would come. I remember one time we decided I should play the banjo for

comes in now and then and says, “Oh, you’re not playing that part right.” We’re really doing it on our feet. It’s exhausting, because you rehearse all day and then go home and write at night, but it’s also exciting.

I’m also excited about working with Bill again. I have a lot of respect for him. I’ve known him, and his family, a long time, and I think his work is great.

SCENIC DESIGNER ERIK FLATMO TELLS ME YOU’RE SITTING IN ONE OF THE THEATER BOXES, IN A WAY ACTING AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN THE AUDIENCE AND THE STAGE.

Right. Keith and I are the band and we’re going to be watching the action. If you go to a musical—*West Side Story* or something like that—often the orchestra or the band isn’t even visible because they’re under the stage while the conductor conducts the score. This is very different. We have to respond to the action as it happens in order to hit our cues. That’s why we have to be placed where we are, so we can see the stage and see the action and react.

HAVE YOU WORKED WITH KEITH TERRY BEFORE?

He was in the Pickle Family too, so he has the same background—interactive music making. There are five Pickles working on this show: Bill and me, Geoff Hoyle, Keith, and Kimi Okada. Geoff is acting. Kimi is, of course, choreographing. So it’s a big reunion, although we’ve stayed in touch with each other. It’s not like we haven’t seen each other. I did a show a couple years ago for Kimi, who is one of the leaders of the ODC Dance Company. She asked me to put together a band of Pickle Family alumni, and Bill, Geoff, and Robin Williams were there, too. We’ve all stayed in touch and done work back and forth.

KEEPING THAT CONNECTION IS IMPORTANT.

I’ve lived in the Bay Area for more than 40 years, all my adult life. All my adult work. It means a lot to me to have old friends and old colleagues. It’s enriching to have all these friends you like and respect and still want to work with. I feel very lucky about that.

WHY DO YOU THINK BILL WANTED TO RETURN TO *SCAPIN*?

It’s a great clown vehicle, and Bill is the world’s greatest clown. And it has a rebellious, political attitude. I wouldn’t say it’s a political show at all, but it is about masters versus servants. Bill has an affinity for that kind of thinking. It’s part of his character and mine, and it was part of what we did with the Pickle Family.

The Pickle Family Circus was an attempt to serve society. The organization was a fundraiser. Every place we went, we were sponsored by a local organization for which the circus raised money. We went up and down the West Coast and helped organizations, like a childcare consortium that was overseeing a number of childcare organizations in that area. Some of those organizations would build their entire year’s budget around the funding our weekends provided. So we were a service organization, and the Pickles were making a political statement in that way. We really felt that we were trying to better the world.