

The playfulness is the thing

CSUN alums build troupe, reputation

By Lisa M. Soddors
Staff Writer

Members of the Sons of Beckett Theatre Company call themselves "rebels without a budget," but these thespians have a cause: challenging audiences to see live theater in a new way.

In small, intimate productions, the 20-member troupe — whose founders met as students at California State University, Northridge — stages shows that tackle complex psychological and political themes.

Sound boring? Think again.

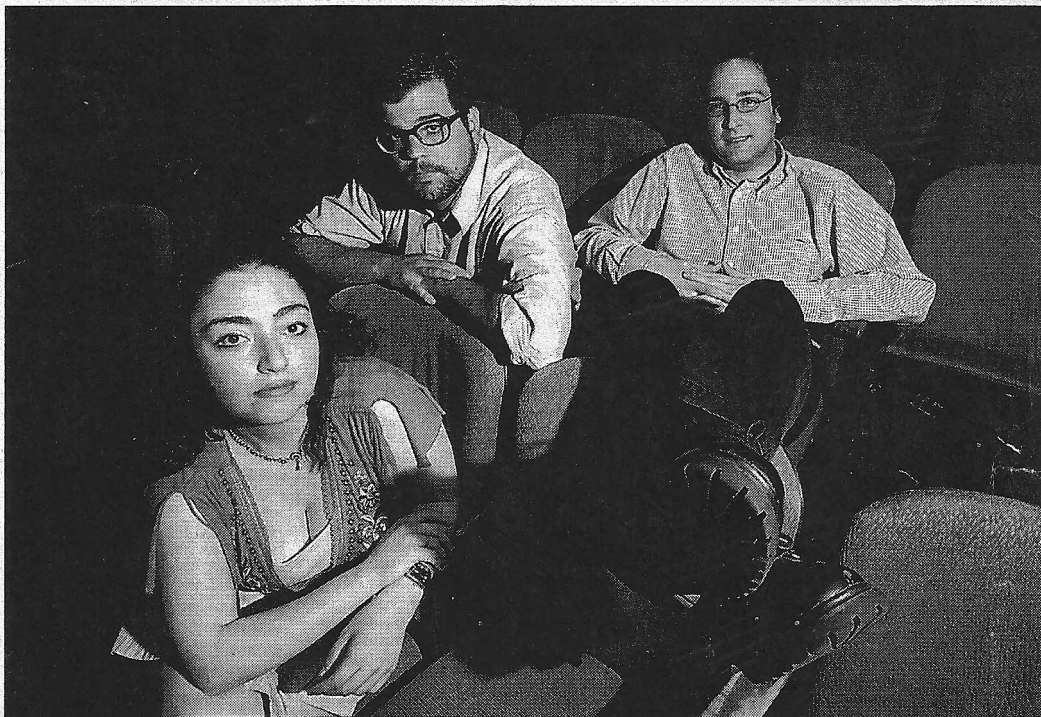
Healthy doses of humor and a touch of the unexpected keep audience members on their toes throughout the performances.

Imagine Sophocles' "Oedipus the King," as a vaudeville-style musical with a four-part harmony barbershop quartet called "The OediPals." (The troupe sells an original-cast recording CD for \$5.) Critics have compared the show to a mix of legendary animator Tex Avery, '50s TV comedy icon Ernie Kovacs and the National Lampoon.

Or how about "Waiting for Godot" set in silent-film-era Hollywood, with the two main characters imagined as Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy? Or perhaps Shakespeare's "Measure for Measure," set in Prohibition times?

"We really want to change the way audiences think about theater — maybe not for good — but just to get them to say, I never thought it could be that way," said co-founder and artistic director Jeff Wienckowski.

The company, known by its tongue-firmly-in-cheek acronym, "SOB," is based at the Theatre Theater arts complex in Hollywood. It got its start in the summer of 2002, when Wienckowski, 25, of



Gus Ruelas/Staff Photographer

Heidi Kushnatsian, Jeff Wienckowski and Eric Carter, all CSUN grads, are founding members of the Sons of Beckett Theatre Company.

Panorama City scraped together \$5,000 in graduation-gift money to stage a production of Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot."

Out of that initial production grew the company, which includes founders Wienckowski; Heidi Kushnatsian, 22, of Van Nuys, currently finishing her last semester at CSUN; fellow CSUN graduates Jay Africa, 28, and his wife, Erin McBride-Africa, 28, of Van Nuys; and CSUN alum Eric Carter, 25, of Panorama City, the financial coordinator.

While some students grumble that CSUN's theater program doesn't focus enough on acting, the founders of Sons of Beckett said it was precisely the program's breadth that prepared them to run their own theater company.

Jerry Abbitt, CSUN theater professor and former department chairman, said the former students stood out at CSUN because of their irreverent spirit and hard work.

"They're not just passionate — they're clear thinkers," Abbitt said. "If you ask 100 theater majors their feelings

about their art, you'll hear the word 'passion' 98 times, but to tackle the complex psychological dangers and terrors of everyday life in a thoughtful as well as entertaining manner — that's the rare group, and that's what I like about them."

Jeff Murray, owner of the Theatre Theater arts complex, said he was initially attracted to the troupe members because of their choice of material.

"They're young, they're smart, they have a really good intellectual base, and yet they don't take themselves too seriously," he said.

But what the company does take seriously is the art of live theater.

"I think what makes us stand out is that we all are so dedicated to the art that we're willing to invest our time, our money and our creativity to produce a lasting impression on society," Kushnatsian said.

"The live experience is so different from the screen," Murray added. "It's commensurate with going to a good rock concert as opposed to listening to the CD. People are getting so numb to looking at a screen and doing it in isolation that small

theaters across Los Angeles are providing a venue that on the whole is very underrated.

"It's probably the original interactive experience. Without the audience, the event is really just a rehearsal. The moment the audience is there, it transforms the performance for everybody."

Sons of Beckett finances its productions through ticket sales, personal contributions and the odd donation, Wienckowski said. Most of the troupe's members still have day jobs in fields ranging from special education to home mortgage loans.

Currently, the troupe is working to establish its not-for-profit tax status and preparing a contemporary summer drama and a fall production of "Antigone," set in the 1990s Seattle grunge scene, with King Creon imagined as a Bill Gates-like character.

For more information about Sons of Beckett, call (323) 465-3136 or check the Web site at www.sonsofbeckett.com.

Lisa M. Soddors, (818) 713-3663
lisa.soddors@dailynews.com