



DALE GULDAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Striking Patrick Cudahy workers celebrate an early victory in a scene from "The Line," the new Theatre X production that opened Friday at the Broadway Theatre Center. The players (from left) are Deborah Clifton, David Rommel, Flora Coker, Rodd Walker and Marcia Hoffman.

Theatre X misses mark in meatpackers drama

By DAMIEN JAQUES
Journal Sentinel theater critic

Missed opportunities could be the theme of "The Line," the dramatization of the bitter, 28-month meatpackers strike at Patrick Cudahy Inc. in the late 1980s. Theatre X opened its world premiere of the drama Friday night in the Studio Theatre at the Broadway Theatre Center, 158 N. Broadway.

Management and labor missed opportunities to reach an agreement that would have saved the jobs of about 800 members of Local P-40 of the United Food and Commercial Workers union. The 850-person local struck in January 1987, and almost all members lost their jobs to replacement workers.

Theatre X missed opportunities in telling a true contemporary story that offers deep reserves of human tragedy, dramatic conflict and continuing relevance. The play, written by John Schneider and co-directed by Schneider and John Kishline, is based to a large extent on oral histories collected by Michael Gordon, a professor of labor history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Transcripts of bargaining sessions, National Labor Relations Board papers and documents, and newspaper reports on the strike also were used by Schneider in creating the script.

Gordon took about 25 oral histories from Patrick Cudahy executives, labor leaders and strikers, giving Schneider and his Theatre X colleagues highly personal testimony. Therefore, it is sad, and a little amazing, that the people in this story have been flattened into one-dimensional stereotypes.

Bad acting and an uncertain style are the culprits. "The Line" wavers between simple docudrama and the exaggerated agit-

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prop style for which the San Francisco Mime Troupe has become known. (The Mime Troupe performs spoken-word plays.)

Mary Helena's broad over-acting accounts for some of the confusion in style. Helena plays six different characters, including television newscaster Melodie Wilson, and her portrayal of former Patrick Cudahy president Al Anderson is so clownish, one doesn't know how to take it.

Andy Nichols postures rather than acts, delivering a caricature of a corporate executive in his portrait of Cudahy president Roger Kapella. Kishline's Dan Habighorst, the company's director of human resources, is the only management character who possesses any dimension.

The strikers in the play are composites of those who gave oral histories. Three veteran Theatre X actresses play strikers, and each picks a note and stays with it for the entire show. Marcie Hoffman is whiny, Flora Coker is stiffly self-righteous and Deborah Clifton is overly actorish.

The play is effective at describing how difficult and unpleasant a meatpacker's job is — especially for those who worked in the Cudahy slaughterhouse.

"The Line" continues through Feb. 18 in the Studio Theatre at the Broadway Theatre Center, 158 N. Broadway. Tickets can be purchased at the Broadway Theatre Center box office or by calling 291-7800.