

Manson: the play and the man

by Stephen R. Mills

"Charles Manson, aka Jesus Christ", a play based on Manson's life and his trial for numerous murders, robberies, and illegal and immoral acts, is now being performed by Pier One Theatre.

Manson is an extraordinary individual and the play, based exclusively on his writings, reports of his actions, and court records, is extraordinary.

Much of what Manson did — indeed, much of the way he thinks, is theatrical. Fabian Jennings, who wrote the play, has seen this, and the theatrical, the dramatic, the fantastic and the bizarre aspects and interpretations of the Manson story make up most of the play.

The play opens and closes in the court room and, in a series of sketches, shows Manson in conversation with a reporter, in drug-induced debauchery with the runaways called "The Family", and playing games — of cowboys and Indians, of Crucifixion — with them. There are also perspectives, showing the traditions on which Manson's delusions are based, such as the myth of the American

way.

Most significantly, there are many monologues by Manson as he constantly denies responsibility for his acts, claiming that he is a product of his age, a child of the System; reared in prison, learning the lessons of the lost and lonely. Manson calls himself too stupid, too small to be blamed. He is nothing, he died long ago, he did his best with what he had, he blames no one, he loves everyone, and so on.

Pier One handles the play extremely well. Music, set design, lighting, costume, and movement accent the bizarre, druggish atmosphere of the play, but also focus audience attention on Manson's crystal-clear claims about his condition and who's to blame.

Acting is very good, with all the cast more or less supplementing a powerful performance by John Dunsworth as Manson.

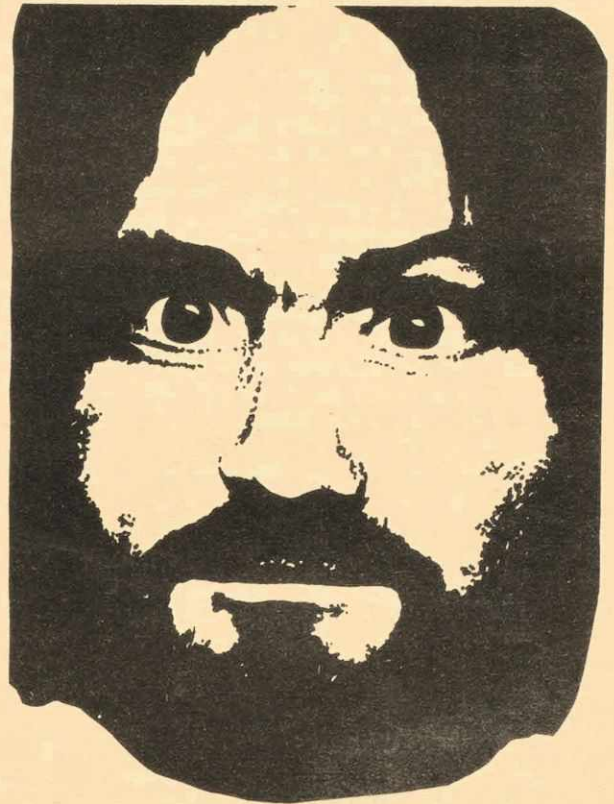
"Charles Manson, aka Jesus Christ" is strong stuff. Pier One must be congratulated on first choosing it and then presenting it so forcefully, intelligently, and professionally.

This play demands that one discuss not only its execution but its content — that is, the personality and circumstances of Charles Manson, and his charges that modern society is responsible for the murders they blame on him and the ruined lives of his "family."

I agree with much of what Manson says about the inhumanity of existing institutions. Capitalism, "democracy", cities, laws, prisons, etc. are obviously very wrong. What they are doing to everyone — is ghastly. On a purely emotional level, one would have to agree with Manson.

His actions against the society are, however, ridiculous. The fact that many of his notions are true should not keep one from realizing that he, himself, is insane. The thoughtless silences, the cries for love, the claims of love, the loneliness, depression, irrationality, are witness to this.

People like Manson — and there are many, and there is Manson in us all — fail to realize that they are part of the in-



stitutions they oppose; that is, if modern society is destroyed, it will be suicide.

Manson's claims that he is dead are tragically true. In essence, he was never given a chance to live; he was never given a chance to develop his intellect and his reason. All that developed in Charles Manson was his emotion, which may explain his charismatic control of The Family.

Yet one should not pity Manson — he himself says and knows he is beyond that or anything now. What is important is the message of this perverse prophet crying in the wilderness of 20th century Western civilization. We are destroying ourselves, we are perverting our children, decimating our environment, losing each other. What can we do?

Manson offers no alternatives. His insane plan to escape to a paradise below the desert serves only to highlight his insanity and the nightmarish quality of the entire situation.

Manson says, "I've found my peace. Now you find yours." And, indeed, we must.

Personally, I tend to see the problem in humanistic terms and would resolve it culturally, with a political basis in active socialism. There are other suggestions being made, however, and other world-saving activities taking place.

The problem presented by the existence of Charles Manson is the problem of life itself — how we would live, what kind of world we would have this be.

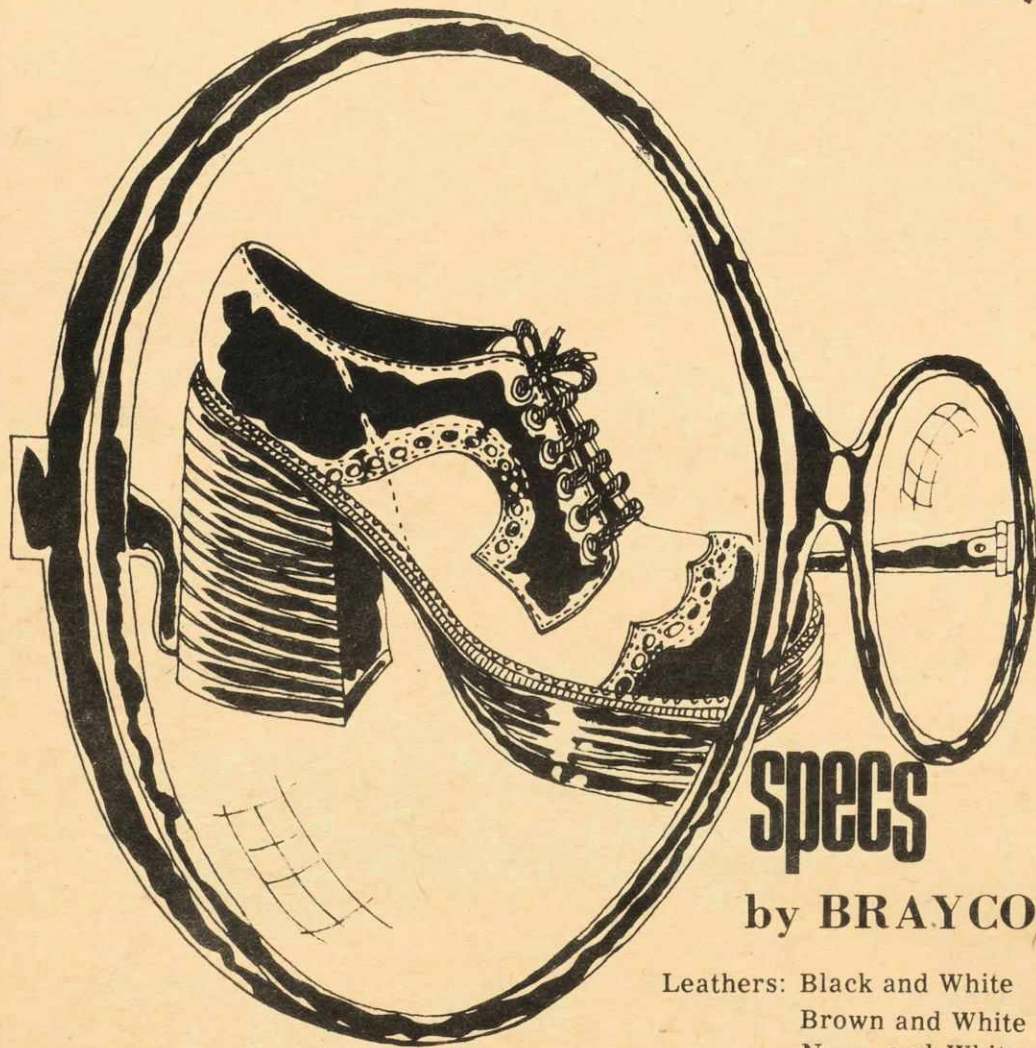
One must conclude that, for better or worse, the answer is forthcoming.



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