

FRONT and CENTER

MINNEAPOLIS

Rue with a Difference

It first Christi Stewart-Brown didn't get it. When Jack Reuler, the artistic director of Minneapolis's Mixed Blood Theatre, asked the Washington, D.C.-based playwright to adapt the 1994 bestseller *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*, the writer balked. "There's no through-line," Stewart-Brown objected.

She had a point. *Reviving Ophelia* isn't even a narrative: It's a set of case studies by psychologist Mary Pipher, examining the problems of adolescent girls today—from eating disorders to sexual peer pressure. Nevertheless, in *Reviving Ophelia*, Reuler saw more than another installment in the mass-market literature of victimhood. He viewed the work as a good match for Mixed Blood, whose mission, he says, is "to address the barriers to success that people face."

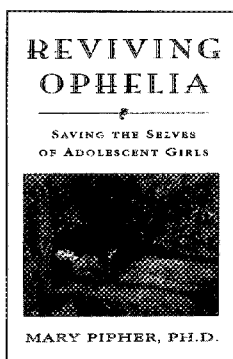
Stewart-Brown finally came on board after she realized she could do the play as a musical. "When you're presenting material like this, it's less didactic if people are singing along with you," she laughs. Her play, which premieres at Mixed Blood on Feb. 2, features R&B-inspired music by David Maddox.

The playwright solved the problem of narrative by using the model of *A Chorus Line*, in which "there are a lot of different characters and different stories."

She was also inspired by one of the chapter headings in Pipher's book: "If Ophelia Were Alive Today." Although she's only a minor part of the book, the figure of Ophelia becomes the main focus of Stewart-Brown's play, taking on the identity of a modern-day psychologist who treats teenage girls. A large portion of the show focuses on these adolescents and their troubling stories (all lifted from Pipher's book). But in the end, the focus returns to Ophelia. As in the original tragedy, this version of Hamlet's sweetheart drowns, but then her newly empowered patients revive her with a heart defibrillator, and everyone lives happily ever after. —Russell Scott Smith



What noble minds are here o'erthrown: from left, Zoe Pappas, Briana Kennedy-Coker and Signe Harriday in Mixed Blood's *Reviving Ophelia*.



SAN FRANCISCO

MAGIC BUS

It's a balmy Sunday night in San Francisco's Mission District, and a crowd is gathering on the corner of 16th Street and Potrero. At 8 p.m. sharp, a fully equipped tourist bus roars up, and soon the coach is barreling out of the District with a chatty young woman in charge who lubes up the passengers with booze and small talk ("I like wine in a box. I like big penises. I looove Casual Corner!").

These hearty souls are off on a three-hour tour hosted by Popcorn Anti Theatre, a company that makes comedy, dance, puppetry, commedia and burlesque intersect in unexpected—and often unrehearsed—ways. Riders are taken to undiscovered nooks and crannies in the Bay Area by producer Hernan Cortez and his wife Brynne (who serves as the talkative hostess). The pair say they created the experience as an outlet for their interactive performance impulses.

"Urban theatre of the '60s punched



Mixing reality and unreality: from left: Hernan Cortez, Jason Craig, Alexis Vaughn and Aaron Treat run riot with Popcorn Anti Theatre.

through the walls of culture, exploding the stage and breaking the fourth wall," says Hernan Cortez. "And then it stopped. Now we've gone beyond all that, with the assumption that you don't need a theatre building at all."

Indeed. After a short ride, the bus screeches to a halt at Ace Recyclers, a surreal junkyard in the old Butchertown section, a desolate industrial area. As fires burn in oil drums around them, the 40 or so adventurers disembark and are treated to snippets of weird, interactive performance: Atop a mountain of discarded computer parts, two street poets



rap about the end of the world. In another corner, a white-trash Carmen sings a bastardized version of the Bizet score. A punk rock

group thrashes away in another nook while a decidedly unfunny performer named Walt the Abusive Clown stalks the audience, intending to actually injure people.

"We mix reality and unreality," says Brynne as she ushers the audience back onto the bus for another interactive experience (moments later, the group will find itself thrust into the middle of a full-fledged drag show at a Mission hair salon). "We throw people into places, leaving mystery in the air. No one, not even us, is quite sure what's going to happen." —John Angell Grant