

The Great Central American Scream Machine

By Dan Hulbert
Theater Critic

Politics is a circus, it's been said for eons, but leave it to the slapstick subversives at Seven Stages to rediscover just how literally true that is. In its uneven but flamboyantly imaginative production of "Bananaland," the history of American involvement in Central America is explained (and comically misexplained) in a very circuslike format — a theme park.

It's a multimedia walking tour of a sort of Six Flags Over Guatemala, as dizzyingly mazelike as a State Department policy paper but much more enjoyable. There are rides (a flight on "Bananair," where rosary beads drop in place of oxygen masks); tests of skill (the Propaganda Maze); and performances (songs by a cheerfully vapid Juanita Marimba, who claims to be a descendant of Carmen Miranda).

Conceived by Ruby Lerner and George King, and designed and performed by a guerrilla militia of top Atlanta artists, "Bananaland" is often surprising and — regardless of your politics, perhaps — bunches o' fun. There's pointed satire for the activist viewer but not too much to bore the mainstream Joe who just wants topical entertainment. One thing's for sure: There's nothing quite like "Bananaland."

The theme park occupies most of the Collective Theatre, which houses Seven Stages, breaking out of Seven Stages' back-door space to spill into niches throughout the building. Viewers are ushered into a central courtyard cafe, where they are heartily welcomed by a stocky General Anastasio Somoza (George Nikas) and entertained by the air-headed Ms. Marimba (Nita Hardy) and her jaunty accordionist. Comic characters work the crowd and lend a jokey, improvisational air; Jim Brooks and Neill Bogan have a wonderfully spontaneous, banana-peel attack as the darkly vaudevillian "Dr. Mengele and Dr. Mengele." Normando Ismay's courtyard design is full of interesting pastel distractions, such as paper palm fronds,



Kent Whipple stars in 'Bananaland,' a wild political farce from Seven Stages.

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thatched roofs and elegantly abstract cutout monkeys. Boxes with Chiquita and Dole logos form walls and towers.

From the courtyard, the audience splits up to tour, on a staggered schedule, the satellite exhibits. Sometimes the fun and the political content overlap beautifully; sometimes they split into two, almost contradictory components.

In the fun parts, Bogan and Brooks, as actors-designers-puppeteers, are masters of the revels; grilling viewers on their gonzo-design polygraph machine (a colander serves as the skullcap); serving as comical captains for a "Bananair" flight and performing the "in-flight puppet show" on the CIA's intrigues in Guatemala (an old golfing trophy represents "Ike," and a small repli-

ca of the marshmallow monster from "Ghostbusters" stands in for a dictator). This puppet show is ingeniously designed and directed by Jon Ludwig. Our sense of puppet scale is stunningly altered when a full-size revolver is pointed at a small, primitive statuette — representing the war-plagued peasants. The slow, soundless toppling of the "executed" statuette is more moving than angry rhetoric ever could be.

King and Ms. Lerner, as "orchestrators" of the theme park, deserve credit for all these effective moments, but it must be noted that some of the more overtly political material that they wrote lacks the theatrical life of the aforementioned segments; it's not that they're not "fun," it's that they're underdramatized and over-documentary. There's a "bus ride" lecture on the cultivation of bananas; a "museum" chronicling the United Fruit Company's involvement in

Guatemalan politics; video clips of U.S. government testimony on Central America. One learns more than one ever cared to know about bananas and America's Central American policy through the 1950s — but I, for one, missed some of the connections with today's controversies. Occasionally there's a kind of preaching-to-the-converted insularity about the work; some gags depend on the assumption that anyone who distrusts Communism must be a fool.

The beauty of "Bananaland" is its array of choices. If something doesn't work, you can move along and you're bound to find something that does. It is a world unto itself and one of the most original creations of the season.

"Bananaland." Seven Stages. Through July 24. 8 p.m. Thursdays. 8 and 10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 5 p.m. Sundays. \$10. 1105 Euclid Ave. 523-7647.