

Eureka's Dario Fo Play — Misery Loves Company

By Bernard Weiner

Maybe it's time that the Eureka Theater Company cease and desist in its apparent efforts to present the entire Dario Fo canon. Its current offering, the U.S. premiere of "A Day Like Any Other" by the Italian playwright and his actress-wife Franca Rame, just isn't in the same league as the Eureka's previous Fo comedies: "Accidental Death of an Anarchist," "About Fate," "An Open Couple."

"A Day Like Any Other," which opened Wednesday, has a wonderful premise, and an inspired comic performance from Joan Mankin, but, to understate, it's mighty thin stuff.

The script's basic idea is that a despairing woman is about to do herself in, but she's constantly interrupted by phone calls from depressed people who mistakenly think she's a psychotherapist. She has to deal with the misery of others before she can get back to her suicide attempt.

Fo at the top of his powers

might have done something weird and wonderful with this idea. But this script remains an anemic, rough draft that seems never to have been taken out for polishing, padded out to 80 minutes with extraneous laugh-getters, tired satire at modern technology and TV soap operas, a bit of slapstick, noodling with the audience, illogical intrusions by a TV-show cop, penis jokes. You get the idea.

Mankin plays Julia, a maker of TV commercials, whose husband left her for a younger woman. Her life is going nowhere, her looks are fading, she's still in love with the cad — no other option, she figures, but a suicide by hypodermic injection that she'll videotape and leave for her husband, to heighten his remorse.

Julia lives surrounded by her electronic tools: four small video monitors, a large video screen, a video camera that follows her every move, lights that go on and off at the snap of her finger, "warning videos" that accompany sirens and flashing lights when she reaches for a cigaret or whiskey. But the expensive equipment, and her exten-



Joan Mankin plays a jilted woman who makes TV commercials and gets phone calls from disturbed people who mistakenly think she's a psychotherapist in 'A Day Like Any Other'

sive wardrobe, are not enough. She's ready to pack it in.

Her phone number mistakenly was listed in a health journal, and now people are calling her for the magazine ad's magic cure for depression, a cockamamie formula that consists of putting a warm brick under your butt and loudly

screaming out vowels.

At first, she tells the people who call that they've got a wrong number, but — surprise! — it doesn't take long before Julia, partly as a kick and partly to fill the void in her life, begins dispensing therapeutic advice. She's finally found a reason to live — only now, as the

play ends, society is moving in on her threateningly, and she reaches for the hypodermic needle again.

Though the fine actors Robert Ernest and Chris Brophy appear as threatening agents at one point — and we hear a wide variety of voices (not all that well-acted) on the phone and from offstage — this is basically



A DAY LIKE ANY OTHER:
Comedy by Dario Fo and Franca Rame. Translated by Christina Nutrizio and Sally Schwager. Directed by Julie Hebert, in collaboration with Richard Seyd. (Eureka Theater Company, in association with San Francisco State University's Theater Arts Department, 16th and Harrison streets, through February 7.)

a one-woman show.

It's a joy watching Mankin racing around the apartment, trying to film her "final spot" while dealing with the increasingly frenetic intrusion of real life. The high point is her wild, mile-a-minute, mixed-up story when trying to describe to her callers, or to a policeman she's called, the events that are driving her bats.

There are giggles aplenty, and Mankin's comic energy, rich store of funny movements and expressions, and her knowledge of how to ad lib off an audience somewhat rescue the script. But it's not quite enough.

The action — directed by Julie Hebert, in collaboration with Richard Seyd — unfolds within Lauren Elder's high-tone apartment setting, complete with a kitchen that we see only in weird back-lighting, the work of Ellen Shireman. Larry Wittnebert coordinates all the complicated video effects.