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LEISURE

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Family Fare

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~ Lost in Translation ~

The walls around the small stage at the All Stars Project are covered with sheets of paper labeled word menus. Scrawled with words and phrases — "Fabulous," "Je t'aime," "What's your e-mail address?" and many more — they function as props, set décor and sometimes script for the current production. But in another sense they're also the cast: this is a play about language, and the word menus, to which the audience contributes, illustrate how many roles simple expressions can play.

The show, "Casper Hauser (A Language Game)," presented by the talented members of the Youth Onstage! Experimental Workshop is based on the story of Kaspar Hauser, the feral child who wandered

into Nüremberg, Germany, in 1828, and was murdered five years later. This 70-minute play, by Dan Friedman, Nancy Hanks and the ensemble, and directed by Mr. Friedman and Brian Mullin, transports the action to the 1990's in an Arkansas town, where Kaspar becomes Casper. A 16-year-old who has never learned language, he becomes a blank on which the townspeople inscribe their own hopes, desires and prejudices.

But this chronicle is not a linear progression. It is also a play within a play, and its disjointed scenes, which include readings from Wittgenstein and other philosophers, use Casper's experience to raise existential questions: Can time be perceived without language?

How does memory function without words? And is there a kind of linguistic Heisenberg uncertainty principle, in which expression itself alters the meaning of thought?

These weighty issues are not for small children, nor are the play's occasional profanity and sexual references. But teenagers may well be fascinated. They have a language all their own, and like Casper, they realize the inadequacy of words to express the chaos of pure feeling.

"Casper Hauser (A Language Game)," today and tomorrow at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m. at the All Stars Project, 543 West 42nd Street, Clinton, (212) 941-1234. Tickets: \$20; matinee, \$15; under 21, \$10.