

PLAYWRIGHT MILLER OUTFOXES TIME TO PRODUCE STORY

By Joan Crowder

Allan Miller's play, "The Fox," was a long time aborning. But after a 25-year gestation period, in 1981, the powerful dramatization of D.H. Lawrence's novella flowered into an award-winning production that continues to receive accolades.

The Back Alley Theater's production of "The Fox" will be presented 8 p.m. Saturday in UCSB's Campbell Hall.

"It's a wonderful story of a play being left in a drawer," said playwright and director Miller, who lives in Los Angeles.

In 1956, Miller was coaching actress

The Fox

Back Alley Theater
UCSB Campbell Hall
8 p.m. Saturday

Geraldine Page at the Actors Studio in New York. He had written "The Fox" from Lawrence's book.

It is the story of two women, Jill and Nellie, whose well-ordered lives in a remote farmhouse in post-World War I England are disrupted by Henry, a young soldier who seeks the affections of one of them.

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The man was Richard Adler, co-author of "Pajama Game" and "Damn Yankees," and he wanted to make a deal.

"You do have the rights to Lawrence's material?" Adler asked.

"I said, 'Yes,'" Miller said. "But, of course, I didn't."

Miller went to Lawrence's literary agents, but they threw him out of their office without even looking at the play. Miller persisted.

I figured if Richard Adler wanted to produce it, it must be worth something," he said, "so I sent it to Freida Lawrence, the author's widow."

Ten days later, he received a cablegram from Mrs. Lawrence, giving him carte blanche with the play.

"She didn't even ask for any option money," Miller said.

But the dream was not to come true so easily.

"Then Adler's suggestions for improving the play began," Miller said.

There were rewrites and more rewrites. "Finally, I had had it, and so had Adler."

"You wrote a beautiful script and I tinkered with it," Adler said."

The two men decided to dissolve their artistic partnership.

"In despair, I ripped up everything I had written," Miller said. "But I forgot that I had kept one copy of my original



Michael Horton is Henry and Gretchen Corbett is Jill in Allan Miller's "The Fox."

See THEATER, Page 8

Theater

Continued from Page 5
script."

Twenty-five years later, Miller had just remarried and was getting ready to throw out a lot of memorabilia, when he ran across the play in a trunk.

"My wife, Laura Zucker, who is now my partner at the Back Alley Theater, wanted to read 'The Fox.' She returned to the room about an hour and a half later, eyes blazing."

"When was the last time you

read this?" she asked.

"I said, '1958.'"

His wife told him he'd better read it again, and when he did, he decided to revive the project and proposed it to Gordon Davis at the Mark Taper Forum, but it was turned down.

Soon after that, Miller and his wife became producers at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys.

"We had decided to do only plays that were new to Los Angeles," Miller said. "My wife said she knew of a play that we wouldn't even have to pay royalties on — 'The Fox.' We were in

rehearsal 10 days later."

Miller decided to direct the play.

"So much time had passed that I didn't think I would be too close to it as playwright," he explained.

By then, he was no longer the appropriate age to play the soldier.

"We changed maybe six lines and amended a line or two," Miller said.

The play premiered in April 1981, and garnered 21 Los Angeles theater awards in the categories of direction, playwriting, ad-

aptation, acting and overall production. Every actor who performed in "The Fox"— 11 in all during the course of the run — received an acting award.

Miller received the Los Angeles Drama Critics Award for Distinguished Achievement in Direction.

Later, "The Fox" moved off-Broadway to the Roundabout Theater for a limited run and received acclaim from New York critics. In 1987, "The Fox" was mounted by Gemini Productions for a tour of England.

It has now been presented by dozens of theaters throughout the United States, Miller said.

Adapting Lawrence's story was a challenge. For one thing, there is very little dialogue in the book. For another, much of the characterization comes from interior monologues or thoughts of each character.

Miller said he developed the

dialogues and characterizations "from the gist of other stories Lawrence had written. I made up the dialogue with his tone of voice."

"The images are pure D.H. Lawrence," Miller said. "The language sounds sensible and rational, but it's not ordinary. The characters say more deeply and quickly what's going on. They don't make conversation."

Miller tried to match the vernacular of Lawrence, he said, even making up words when necessary to get the right effect.

Some of the questions posed in "The Fox" are the same Lawrence asked over and over again in his work, Miller said, such as "Is it possible to be lovers and equals?" and "Does a woman need to be dominated?"

Symbolism is also a critical element in Lawrence's work, and

See THEATER, Page 17

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Theater

Continued from Page 8

the most symbolic is the soldier, Henry, himself — "The Fox."

"Henry is a creature with no social conscience," Miller said. "He has no experience with women. Jill and Nellie are like two strange birds in an exotic jungle, and he starts sniffing them out. He proves his maleness by hunting and by fixing things around the house."

The playwright describes Nellie and Jill's sexuality as "hide-bound."

"Nellie's sexuality and sensuality break loose like a flood."

Miller is adamant about the

women's bond with each other, which was portrayed as a lesbian relationship in a film of "The Fox" made in the '60s.

"I have scrupulously tried to keep that out of the play," Miller said. "Half of every audience responds in this way" (seeing Nellie and Jill as being in a lesbian relationship).

Miller has never seen that in the book and does not believe that was Lawrence's intention, he said.

Lawrence's concerns were

much more complex than breaking up a sexual relationship. He was more concerned about emotional needs and interlocking fears and attractions.

In this particular play, the isolation and the yearning for contact makes Henry's incipient and eventually destructive presence possible.

"The Fox' is about the power men crave to have over women, about the primitive forces in women and men that clash and clang and finally destroy," Miller

said. "It's a contest of wills. It has poetic, natural, sensual flavors. It's not a mystery, but it has suspense."

The Back Alley Theater is a non-profit theater devoted to introducing new plays to the Los Angeles area, Miller said. He is artistic director and Zucker is producer.

"Laura and I cast each production as it seems to require, from the considerable pool of talented actors in the Los Angeles area,"

Miller said.

The actors in the UCSB outing have been with the play since its first production. Gretchen Corbett as Jill and Michael Horton as Henry were in the original cast and Diane Saint-Marie has been the understudy for Nellie.

Miller was in residence at UCSB last Wednesday, discussing with students and faculty both the play and D. H. Lawrence's work.

Information about the production: 961-3535.

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