

VALLEY

San Fernando, Conejo, Santa Clarita & Simi Valleys

Thursday, September 10, 1981

Los Angeles Times



Producer Laura Zucker



KEN DARE / Los Angeles Times

Playwright Allan Miller

'The Fox' Wins Raves After 24 Years for Actor-Author

By MARK A. STEIN, *Times Staff Writer*

Frustrated by a lack of interesting roles to play, Allan Miller, a young New York actor, decided to write one for himself. With little writing experience, he promptly penned a stage version of "The Fox," D.H. Lawrence's taut novella of sexual power and possession. That was 24 years ago.

"The Fox" finally opened only a few months ago at the tiny Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys. Disappointment and disinterest had delayed its arrival for more than two decades—but the playwright isn't concerned.

With Miller directing—at 52, he's now too old to portray the play's vibrant young lead—the play has blossomed into a considerable critical and popular success.

It also has turned into something of a pleasant surprise for Miller and his producer, Laura Zucker, who also is his wife.

"It never occurred to us . . . that it would be the kind of critical success it was," said Zucker, sharing breakfast recently with Miller in an Encino delicatessen. "We were totally unprepared for the volume and intensity of the response."

Miller's face, familiar because of the dozens of characters he has played in films and on television, broke into a grin. "I can't be thrilled every day," he said, "but I come as close to it as is possible."

The play, which moved in July to the larger L.A. Stage Co. Theater on Las Palmas Street in Hollywood, will close Sunday, then move to New York for an opening next spring. Other productions spring up everywhere from Santa Barbara to Brussels.

Miller, who prefers acting to directing or writing, clearly is taken aback by the fact that the play, his first, has been so warmly received.

"I'm stunned, I'm bemused, I'm tickled, I'm pleased, I'm delighted,

Please see 'FOX,' Page 16

'FOX:' 24 Years Later, Script Wins Raves

Continued from First Page

"I'm proud," he said, "and I'm amazed that I wrote that play as well as I did when I was only 28 years old."

He said he started writing "because I was having no luck getting jobs as an actor." After knocking out a few television scripts, which he sold in Canada, and a couple of plays, which he didn't sell at all, he decided to tackle an old favorite, D.H. Lawrence.

"His themes, what he wrote about—when I was in my teens and early 20s I remember thinking how they kept mirroring my own dilemmas in such pungent, forceful ways that I became deeply immersed in his characters and language," Miller said.

One such character was Henry Grenfel, the 20-year-old World War I veteran who, at war's end, returns to his grandfather's country cottage in the north of Eng-

D.H. Lawrence's widow gave Miller "carte blanche" with script.

land. What he finds, however, is not his grandfather, who has died, but two women who bought the farm to start anew their lives, together.

Grenfel's spirited, tense and ultimately tragic relationship with the women piqued Miller's interest.

"The Fox" was just one variation of (Lawrence's) theme of males needing to dominate women," he said, his face betraying a deep-seated ambivalence on the matter.

"I think this is an issue Allan has struggled with in his own life," added Zucker as her husband paused to find the right words to finish his thought.

"Is the man supposed to protect the woman?" Miller asked rhetorically. "Are they supposed to be soulmates?

Are they supposed to be equal soulmates? Is the man instinctively or conditioned to feel he is superior in terms of facing the dangers of the world? Of accomplishing things? Of being the protector?"

"He (Lawrence) wrote of this, and it was a major struggle in my life as well."

After finishing "The Fox" script in 1957—"it was written, basically, as an acting project for me," he said—Miller showed it to actress Geraldine Page, who read, then passed it on to playwright Richard Adler. Miller said Adler was interested in producing the play on Broadway.

"He asked me if I had the rights to the play, and of course I said yes," Miller recalled. "Then I realized I had better see if I could actually get the rights to it."

Miller contacted the New York agent for the dead author's estate but was rebuffed. However, a copy of the script he left behind was sent to Lawrence's widow, Frieda, in England. "About a week later," Miller said, "I received a cablegram from her saying it was the best adaptation of his work she had ever read, and and I had carte blanche to do anything I wanted with it."

The deal with Adler eventually soured, however, and Miller, "discouraged and disheartened" by the experience, said he junked everything he had written up to that point—except for one dog-eared copy of the script for "The Fox."

Miller said he forgot about the play as he pursued his acting career, which included teaching stints at New York University, the City College of New York and the Yale School of Drama, where he met Zucker. Eventually, the two moved to Los Angeles.

Both were unable to find steady work here, so Zucker returned to New York to teach while Miller made one last attempt to establish himself by staging and starring in "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?"

The overwhelming success of this play—Miller said he originally thought it would be his bitter "kiss off" to California—convinced them to stay in Los Angeles.

They eventually Alley Theater on

Having their o deliberate statu

"People are so i is only a little-thi dicious. There's 50-seat and 99-se big theaters in to know that."

The Valley seen

"As Valley res there isn't that n

"I like the but I have to

establish somethi us. We didn't wa Hollywood on Me

About the time er, who was trai critic and direct "The Fox." Howe selves. "We didn want to do a vanit

They submitted Mark Taper Foru

After turning r Theater product

"Feedlot," Yank said. "we finally c And they produce

But while the f Back Alley Thea building inspecto

It Wins Raves for Valley Actor-Playwright

...imates? Is the man in-
...he is superior in terms
...orld? Of accomplishing

...is, and it was a major

...cript in 1957—"it was
...ject for me," he said—
...aldine Page, who read
...t Richard Adler. Miller
...producing the play on

...ghts to the play, and of
...d. "Then I realized I had
...he rights to it."

...k agent for the dead au-
...However, a copy of the
...to Lawrence's widow,
...ek later," Miller said, "I
...saying it was the best
...ver read, and and I had
...anted with it."

...y soured, however, and
...rtened" by the exper-
...he had written up to
...eared copy of the script.

...e play as he pursued his
...teaching stints at New
...ge of New York and the
...met Zucker. Eventual-

...dy work here, so Zucker
...while Miller made one
...by staging and starring
...ver Been?"

...f this play—Miller said
...e his bitter "kiss off" to
...stay in Los Angeles.

They eventually took over and refurbished the Back Alley Theater on Burbank Boulevard.

Having their own small theater in the Valley was a deliberate statement, they said.

"People are so inured to this idea that a 50-seat house is only a little-theater production," Miller said. "It's ridiculous. There's more invigorating work going on in 50-seat and 99-seat houses than you have in any of the big theaters in town. The people who go to those shows know that."

The Valley seemed like a ripe market, Zucker added.

"As Valley residents, we appreciate the fact that there isn't that much here," she said. "We wanted to

*"I like the idea of writing again,
but I have to have a need."*

establish something that would be here for people like us. We didn't want to become another small theater in Hollywood on Melrose Avenue."

About the time they took over the Back Street, Zucker, who was trained as an actress and experienced as critic and director, discovered Miller's old script for "The Fox." However, they balked at producing it themselves. "We didn't know what to do with it; we didn't want to do a vanity production," Zucker said.

They submitted it to Gordon Davidson, director of the Mark Taper Forum, and were rejected.

After turning out a string of successful Back Street Theater productions themselves—"The Journalist," "Feedlot," "Yanks 3, Detroit 0" and "Rubbers"—Zucker said, "we finally decided to throw caution to the wind." And they produced a hit.

But while the play wowed audiences and critics, the Back Alley Theater itself was less of a hit with city building inspectors. The violations cited, such as exit

doors located too far apart, were technical in nature, Miller said.

"It's too big to be a little theater," Zucker simplified, adding that the 50-seat house should reopen in another year, provided the New York production of "The Fox" goes smoothly.

Despite his success with "The Fox," Miller is cautious about his future as a writer. "I don't know (if I can do it) any more," he said. "I haven't written in many years."

Twenty-four years, to be exact. Not since he wrote "The Fox."

"His big fear right now," added Zucker, "is that he's going to be a one-play playwright."

"I like the idea of writing again," Miller continued, "but I have to have a need." And, he added, the opportunity. Plans to rent a house in Malibu for a summer of writing collapsed when the success of "The Fox" and its prospects for a New York run "put the kibosh on any more writing" for the moment, he said.

The idea of returning triumphant to New York excites Miller and Zucker, but they both readily admit to feeling a bit worn out by the play.

"One of the reasons I do a play is because it is such a wonderful excursion into another time and place, like being immersed in a good novel," Zucker said. "All of your energy is devoted to this place in 1918 post-World War I England, (and) when you put it together, you really feel you've been to another world."

"And then you feel, 'Enough already,'" she added.

Miller agreed. "One of the reasons I want to act is because it gives me the chance to taste other people's lives regularly," he said. "I've been with these lives for a good while now and I'm tired of them."

Both recognize the condition as temporary. "When we've had a couple weeks off, doing nothing, we'll be chomping at the bit again," Zucker said.

Doing what—writing a new play? Producing one? Directing one? Acting in one?—They wouldn't guess.

"Life continues to be a surprise," Miller would only say. "The law of life is change."