



The Fox

REVIEWED BY CHARLES FABER

Drama-Logue Senior Theatre Critic

Produced by Laura Zucker for the Back Alley Theatre, 15321 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; 780-2240. Opened April 12; plays Thurs.-Sat., 8; through May 9.

A few examples come readily to mind: Strindberg's *The Dance of Death*, Sartre's *No Exit*, Owen Davis' adaptation of Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, plays which generate such intensity of sexual passion by the depth of their characters and the pressure of confining environments that they would seem not to need more than the proverbial two boards upon which to act it out. D.H. Lawrence's *The Fox*, as adapted and directed by Allan Miller, belongs to this rare company.

Lawrence's novella and the film made from it have familiarized us with the triangle of Jill and Nellie, who are desperately trying alone to make pay a remote English farm, and Henry, just returned to England from World War I combat, whom they invite to stay with them in the house he has occupied as a boy with his grandfather. But it is Miller's stage version, with fire at its heart, meticulously written, and observing the unities of time, place and action, which tightens the emotional noose so palpably and perilously close to us that we experience the terror afresh and have greater pity for the tragic three than ever before. The immediacy of the stage draws the audience into the tight claustrophobic circle as no other medium has the power to do.

The three writhe in a Laocoon embrace finally broken by Henry's wanton but inevitable act. Michael Horton has the freshness, the presumption, the enormous confidence of the young soldier bent on finding his place, literally and figuratively, in the post-World War I world. His rough charm is part of the masculine assertiveness, symbolized by the fox, which several generations later was pejoratively named machismo. Henry doesn't put it into words — the characters hesitate to verbalize their emotions — but he hates Jill and Nellie being together, and all that it implies. Whatever he thinks their relationship may be, lesbianism isn't suggested, but it's clear that he believes, in a way still prevalent, that any female dalliance is simply preliminary to the "main event," in this instance the consummation of his love for Nellie after their betrothal.

Nellie, who appears at first to be the stronger of the women, is played by Jenny O'Hara with a tremendous reserve of inner power, which communicates itself through her haunted eyes, her slow, stolid movements. Her awakening to the possibility of life with a man, someone to protect *her*, is wrenchingly sad, as one might imagine a primitive rite of passage to be. Margaret Ladd is the more outgoing Jill, content doing household chores and playing the Irish harp, who tyrannizes her companion as only the weak know how to do. It is a subtle, finely wrought performance which beautifully complements the strong work of Miss Ladd's colleagues. All sustain the North Country accent even in the most demanding emotional scenes.

The spare farmhouse interior (uncredited in the program) is as right as Hilary Sloane's period costumes and Christopher Milliken's lighting, which finds its sources in hearth and kerosene lamp. The ambiance is atavistic, smelling of earth and echoing with primal screams.

Catch *The Fox*.



Margaret Ladd, Jenny O'Hara & Michael Horton