

THEATRE



THE FOX

No one evokes the mystery and power of the Promethean fire in its guise of human sexuality as does D.H. Lawrence. None has done it better—until now, when Allan Miller offers his inestintable aid and playwright, director and nonpareil adapter of Lawrence's short novel, *The Fox*. Miller's dramatization of the novella is not only a work of art, it is also an act of homage. This flawless production organically and seamlessly joins the work of novelist and playwright, making *The Fox* a major theatrical event, something to celebrate. The play is perhaps worthy of Pulitzer prize consideration. (If another Los Angeles Equity waiver premiere—*The Gin Game*—won it, why not this?) Acted, staged, mounted to utter perfection, there is not a false note.

The drama of three-cornered love (or passion, or sexuality, or emotional need) unfolds as a flower unfolds, and is as deeply rooted in the earth. It is set in an earthy place, a remote, austere north of England farmhouse. The time is 1918. Sense of time and place is strong and definite, yet there

is a dreamlike strangeness that imparts the timelessness and universality of myth. Two women live here. The "white flower" Jill Banford, (played by Margaret Ladd) is feminine, decorative, fragile, with slender ankles and honey-blond coloring. She sweetly plays her Irish harp; she leans on her stronger companion, but she herself is strong in the way of the terrible weak. Nellie March, (played by Jenny O'Hara) seems the strong one; she is secret and silent; there is a soft heaviness and slowness about her, and a hidden vulnerability. Despite her masculine trousers, and her handy way with a saw, she is a womanly woman.

In the two women's close emotional relationship, and in today's context, the suggestion of lesbianism is escapable, but never spelled out. Nellie flares: "I committed myself to Jill a long time ago!" Jill complains that she can't sleep until Nellie comes to bed. Yet the relationship remains delicate, somehow innocent.

This is a feminine stronghold, a rough sanctuary, but the women fear they cannot survive another harsh

winter here. When a young man in the uniform of a Canadian soldier comes knocking they are first fearful, then hopeful. Henry Grenfel seems boyishly ingratiating, eager to please, ordinary enough, but he proves extraordinarily adept. Suddenly the barren hens begin to lay. He puts food on the empty table. He captures the marauding fox that has been ravaging the barnyard, the fox that's been intruding into Nellie's dreams. There is a magic about Henry, he is something of a magus. The strains of Pan's wild pipes compel him; his potency is symbolized by the gun that arouses him to such excitement.

Conceived, written, and played so impeccably by Michael Horton, Henry is fascinatingly complex—man the master, he who cannot be denied, the eternal masculine. He is at once the feral animal and the wily hunter, the stalker of prey. The prey he chooses is Nellie, who is older than he, plainer than Jill, shy, honest, without coquetry. Through hostility and defiance to incredulity ("Why me?"). Nellie finally succumbs as indeed she must. Henry makes her feel "safe," what a wonder! Jill fights fiercely for her life's companion. The tug of war builds to a thrilling, stunning climax that, for once on the modern stage, ends not in a whimper but a big dramatic bang.

The skill and power of the writing, the direction and the acting, are marvelous. A deep, swift current flows inexorably, irresistibly, beneath the smooth surface as suspense, conflict and dramatic tension build, steadily, naturally and breathlessly. Everything about the production is magnificent, the appropriate background music, the simple uncluttered set so typically Lawrence with its fire-blackened stone hearth, its plain, rough furnishings and its adjacent work shed where Henry achieves his conquest, more primordial than romantic.

Though Lawrence's novel contains only a few lines of dialogue, Miller, has distilled exactly the right dialogue from the poetic narrative, and it is beautifully spoken in the soft lilt and cadence of the North Country dialect. The three actors are superb. And superbly balanced and orchestrated by their director/playwright, Horton. O'Hara and Ladd are an unforgettable symphonic trio. Producer Laura Zucker, lighting designer Christopher Milliken, costume designer Hilary Sloane and sound designer Steve Barker all richly deserve plaudits.

This is living, vital, pulsing theatre at its best, pared to the quick, distilled to the essence. To participate as audience in such excellence, integrity and artistry leaves one euphoric for days.

(At the *Back Alley Theatre*, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 780-2240 or 990-4569. Plays Thurs.-Sun., 8 p.m., scheduled through May 9 with an extension likely.)

—Polly Warfield