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The Hollywood Reporter

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF SERVICE TO THE INDUSTRY

VOL. CCLXVI, NO. 36 HOLLYWOOD, CALIFORNIA, THURSDAY, MAY 7, 1981

STAGE REVIEW

The Fox

Back Alley Theatre, through July 26

Producing directors Laura Zucker and Allan Miller have come up with another memorable evening of theatre at their Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys. It is Miller's stage adaptation of D. H. Lawrence's "The Fox," which is outstanding in every detail.

Produced by Zucker, with Miller also directing, the play centers on Jill Banford (Margaret Ladd) and Nellie March (Jenny O'Hara), who have retreated to a remote English farm in 1918. By the time the play opens, they have been pretty well defeated by the rough life, but their destinies are altered with the appearance of Henry Grenfel (Michael Horton), who claims to have lived on the farm with his grandfather years earlier. He kills the fox that has been preying on the livestock, gets the hens laying again and puts everything pretty much back in working order. He also begins to come between these two women who have "lived together and dreamed together for years."

Lawrence's vaguely allegorical work is heavily laced with symbolism and is developed with strong sexual undercurrents in a battle between and among the sexes (homosexuality is implied, but never overtly stated), all of which is expertly preserved in the play. Miller also beautifully transfers Lawrence's verbal imagery to the stage in an engrossingly dramatic script.

The production is flawless. Miller's thoughtful direction is tight and skillfully paced, and the performances are remarkable. O'Hara, as the stronger and more masculine Nellie, is effectively matched by Ladd, as the seemingly naive and more delicate Jill. Both characters undergo major transformations during the course of the action, however, which is delineated by these two actresses with great sensitivity. Horton's Henry is a clever adversary for these two women and the actor develops the role with boyish sexuality and fascinating physical movements. The character, like the fox of the title, is a free-spirited predator, and Horton makes him extremely personable, with a subtle sense of self-assured masculinity that never becomes overbearing.

As usual at the Back Alley, the physical production is first-rate, with an excellent uncredited set (Patrick McFadden is billed as master carpenter), atmospheric lighting by Christopher Milliken, character-perfect costumes by Hilary Sloane and good sound by Steve Barker.

This is an Equity-waiver production that definitely deserves attention and a commercial life beyond this run, which has already been extended through July 26.

- Ron Pennington