

STAGE WATCH

BOBRICK UNSURE OF 'ARE YOU SURE?'

by SYLVIE DRAKE,
Times Staff Writer

There's funny and there's funny. Sam Bobrick isn't fussy. He'll be either. What he *doesn't* want to be is "treated worse than an ax murderer on Page 2," which is exactly how he felt when the reviews were in of his first play, "Norman Is That You?," written with Clark.

Together, Bobrick and Clark have written some of television's most stylish comedy scripts and some of Broadway's biggest bombs, all of which later raked in gold in the provinces. Flying solo now, Bobrick's trying to reverse the trend: Start small, go big, don't bomb. On Feb. 20 he's opening a new play, "Are You Sure?," at the Back Alley Theater, a Waiver house.

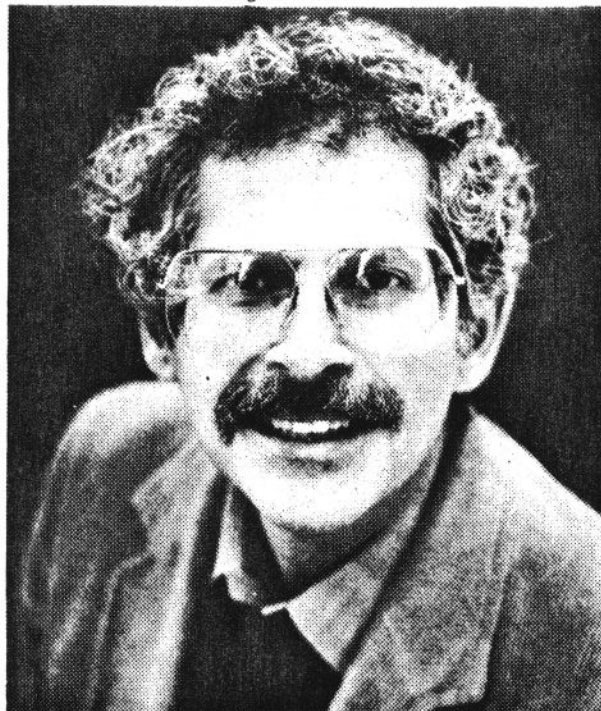
"I'm *not* sure," the wiry Bobrick explained Tuesday, leaning over a bowl of rapidly cooling oatmeal at Du-Par's. It's a real departure for me—a mystery thriller that takes place in a man's mind. I don't know how to talk about it. I don't even know how I wrote it. It's not written as a comedy, though there's comedy in there. It's a play that takes me away from what everyone expects me to do. I don't know if it's because I'm getting older, but I'm getting more serious."

Bobrick, who is really a nebbish hiding behind rugged good looks, will have to tell it to the Marines. Judging from the two short plays he contributed last October to the Back Alley's "24 Hours," funny is second nature. With Clark he contributed memorable scripts to such TV series as "The Smothers Brothers," "Get Smart," "The Andy Griffith Show" and "Kraft Music Hall." For the stage they wrote "No Hard Feelings," "Murder at Howard Johnson's," "Wally's Cafe" and, of course, "Norman," which hit Broadway in 1970.

"George Abbott directed," Bobrick recalled. "Meeting him was one of the highlights of my life. He was 82 or 83, never lived in the past. I couldn't keep up with him. I decided to have lunch with him every day to see what he ate, but he ate the same junk I did."

"The funny thing is that we've done well with our plays. They get done. But Broadway—" he said, popping mid-sentence with a gesture of exasperation, "Oliver (playwright Oliver Hailey) said to me 'Look, it's just as if one of our children had been killed,' and I answered, 'Oliver, I wish we'd been given that choice.'" Only kidding—but Bobrick can't resist a joke. Even his recollection of how he became a writer is like something out of "MASH."

BOB CHAMBERLIN / Los Angeles Times



For Sam Bobrick, funny is second nature.

"My mother told me to become an accountant," said the Chicago-born playwright. "I did it for a year in college and went so crazy with the figures I enlisted in the Air Force."

Which war?

"They never told me. When they asked me what I wanted to do, I said, 'Anything but accounting.' So for two years I was an accountant. Finally, I checked out some books on psychology and wrote a letter to the base commander saying, 'I am now neurotic and if you leave me in accounting I will become psychotic.' It scared him. They put me to work on the base newspaper."

Bobrick wrote "Are You Sure?" a year ago because, he said, "You can't keep writing the same play all the time. Ron and I wrote about confused, middle-class America, which is what we were—confused and ignored."

But then Bobrick became play doctor for "The Wiz."

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"You've heard the line? If Hitler were alive you'd send him on the road with a musical?" He was given a point in the show and it kept him from toiling in television for "three or four years."

Bobrick, who says he "doesn't like to interfere" with rehearsals, at least not much, feels the cast of "Are You Sure?" is distinguished: Lois Nettleton, Ronny Cox, Jeffrey Haddow, Ellen Maxted, Catherine McLeod and Jack Collins. Allan Miller directs.

"What I love about the theater," said the playwright who is currently under contract to Warner Bros. to develop television properties, "is that you don't have to give your lead character a dog. Warners treats me well," he said, "because they think of me as a playwright. They respect theater. They've put me on for two years. If I don't sell anything, I hope they put me through medical school."

INSIDE CALENDAR

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Playwright Sam Bobrick's new play, "Are You Sure?" is only part of his agenda with Sylvie Drake in Stage Watch on Page 2.



And going back where we started (at the Back Alley Theater), Oliver Hailey has told Stage Watch that, after a bidding war between the publishing houses of Samuel French and Dramatists Play Service, the latter acquired the rights to "24 Hours" for \$4,500, a sum to be divided into 25 equal parts: one for each contributing playwright and one for the theater. "The bidding actually went as high as \$5,000," said the Back Alley's Laura Zucker, "but by then we'd already signed the contract."