



Michael Cavanaugh and Jenny O'Hara star in "Cisterns," which was written by Julie Jen-

sen and now is being performed at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys.

'Cisterns' places us all where we, sadly, have been before

We have all experienced it — the play, film or TV show that produces the distinct feeling of *deja vu*. Through our perception of the characters, plot and setting, the feeling builds slowly and finally engulfs us: Oh no, not that again!

Julie Jensen's "Cisterns," now at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys, is just such a play. One could spend the better part of the intermissionless 70-minute playing time contemplating the various influences on Jensen's writing.

Forget about your standard Harold Pinter, Edward Albee, Lanford Wilson or D.H. Lawrence analogies. "Cisterns" is a kind of first: It closely resembles a play written by one of the Back Alley's own producers!

That play, of course, is Allan Miller's acclaimed adaptation of Lawrence's "The Fox." In "Cisterns," we have a similar theme of two women living together in a rustic cabin in the

semi-wilderness. They are supposedly sisters, but their relationship hints at considerably more than that.

Once again, a male visitor shows up unexpectedly — mentioning other romantic interests but ultimately claiming (or, in this case, reclaiming) one of the women as a sexual conquest, leaving the other woman to contemplate her utter futility.

Playwright Jensen, director Laura Zucker and able performers Michael Cavanaugh, Jenny O'Hara (a veteran of "The Fox") and Jennifer Salt all approach their various assignments with talent and dedication. The same can be said for

scenic designer Jim Billings, lighting ace Joe Morrissey and sound expert Jerry Sider.

But you cannot help feeling that "Cisterns" is enigmatic more for the sake of theatrical fashion than genuine dramatic tension.

Furthermore, when the male character — a self-described second-rate actor — bemoans the fact that his future holds nothing greater than appearing in dinner theaters with "has-been stars like Mitzi Gaynor and Rhonda Fleming," you suddenly realize that "Cisterns" is more than enigmatic: It is lying.

— RICK TALCOVE