

Cisterns

REVIEWED BY T. H. McCULLOH

Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; 780-2240. Opened June 12; plays Thurs.-Sun., 8; through July 17.

It is the season of siblings. Not only are playwrights returning to the use of language in plays, they are thankfully beginning to focus their attention once



Jennifer Salt, Michael Cavanaugh and Jenny O'Hara in 'Cisterns'

JUNE 16-22, 1983

DRAMA-LOGUE

more on the very interior lives of families. Julie Jensen says the title of her well-wrought *Cisterns* is "a pun on 'sisters.' A little game playing." And game playing is an apt description of the emotional lives to Jensen's sisters. This is not, however, the game playing of George and Martha nor of Milo and Andrew. Her play is constructed like a three-dimensional chess game, on different levels and with more pieces than are obvious to the eye at a glance.

Simply, writer Samantha Harris lives in the worn out family house "in the mountains of Utah;" her sister Winifred, after an empty marriage to an actor during an empty stay in Hollywood, has returned to share the house. The evening in question, and their lives, are not so simple. Winnie is "36, going on four," Sam says. "Just like mother, who was five." Sam is wise in a Huckleberry manner, the girl everyone has fun being around but no one marries. Game One: It is time to celebrate mother's birthday. Mother is a dressmaker's dummy. Sam and Winnie have brought presents for the dear old thing and each becomes "mother" in her turn. Sam receives a dreadful statuette, Winnie a dreadful nightgown from Frederick's. The worse the gift, the louder the sisters' laughter. There are also imaginary playmates to take the blame for the sisters' erring ways. Buster is nasty wiseacre, attracted to boys with bubble-gum on their breath and a bulge in their jeans; Beverly always needs one more drink (Winnie only drinks two). It is their standard party, on schedule, until Winnie's ex-husband Legrand arrives.

Game Two is the emergence of the power struggle between Sam and Winnie. Jenny O'Hara is an intricate Sam, the big sister who hated Winnie as a child because she was "cute." Perhaps that hatred is still smoldering; we only get a hint when Winnie commands and Sam obeys, her eyes burning with an unnamed emotion. O'Hara is able to retreat with the same strength as when she advances, and the same tough vulnerability. Jennifer Salt is the eternal cheerleader as Winnie. When Legrand sees her barefoot in a dated satin dress he is floored; Salt makes us believe Winnie is as stunning as Legrand sees her. Both sisters are flawed but these actresses use those flaws as strengths and weave the intricate thread of memory through performances which are real and affecting.

Facing the sisters with the real world in the appearance of Legrand creates a delicate balance which is out of kilter here. After a smashing entrance Michael Cavanaugh becomes stolid and ordinary, qualities Legrand must have as a working but failed actor (who doesn't want, at 50, to be playing dinner theatres with "washed-up movie stars"), but tempered with a fey quality to focus his relationship with Winnie. Cavanaugh's Legrand would not still be entranced with Winnie and his heaviness dampens delicate moments such as Winnie's memory monologue about the Hollywood days.

There are more games being played; *Cisterns* is a dream play which has to be filtered through soft, brightly tinted gauze and the moments when O'Hara and Salt have Jim Billings' tacky, tasteless living room to themselves it works. Director Laura Zucker understands these two women and allows them their chess moves with the same fluidity as their cascading imaginations. Joe Morrissey's lighting, although a bit bright at times, at others captures the loneliness of dusk before a cloudburst and Jerry Sider's sound conjures up the dark, rolling clouds of a western thunderstorm. The uncredited costumes are perfect.

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