

L.A. WEEKLY June 24-30, 1983

Theater

NEW REVIEWS

CISTERNS Two grown-up sisters throw a party for their mother's birthday in their rural Utah home. But when mother turns out to be a dressmaker's

dummy and the only guest is the uninvited ex-husband of one of the sisters, the stage is set for some Pinteresque power plays. Winifred is the dippy, wistful sister who was once married. Samantha is big, hearty, capable and, if I heard aright, a lesbian. Sam protects and needles Winifred. But Winifred also controls Sam. When Legrand, the bisexual ex husband, a failed actor, drops by to tell Winifred he's going to marry again, *Cisterns* becomes an explosive mixture.

The trouble is, it never explodes. This is a play that would benefit from being nastier; the characters circle each other verbally, all sorts of psycho-damage gets hinted at. playwright Julie Jensen sets up a *folie a trois*, crackling with emotional electricity and what happens? Winifred goes to bed with her ex-husband vowing that this time she won't be afraid of having sex and Sam puts her slicker on and goes out for a walk. The storm that has been circling the action all night with ominous rolls of thunder has burst, but it's brought benediction rather than bitterness and betrayal, in an oddly optimistic, not to say abrupt, ending.

Well, I don't buy it, despite the flawless, fluid interaction of Jenny O'Hara as the acid-tongued, literary Sam (clearly a writer's creation, but none the worse for that) and Jennifer Salt, whose invented alter egos indulge in all the vices she is too much mother's little lady to admit. These two frolic,

gambol, spat and booze it up together with utter conviction. In fact, part of Michael Cavanaugh's achievement as Legrand, the ex husband, is that he doesn't disturb their chemistry when he joins the party. Director Laura Zucker shows perfect control of the rhythm of the trio's playing, Jerry Sider's sound produces one of the few believable off-stage storms I've heard, and Ms. Jensen writes up a storm herself, despite her tendency to turn it into April Showers. Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; Thurs.-Sun., 8 p.m.; thru July 17. Call 780-2240 or 851-9750.

— Mike Bygrave