

Middling update on middle-class ideals in 'Suburban Romance'

The style is contemporary but the subject is stale

SUBURBAN ROMANCE, a play by Richard Caliban, directed by Allan Miller, set designed by Don Llewellyn; lighting design by Pam Rank; sound design by Jerry Sider; costume design by Barbara Metzbaum; line producer, Susan Goldstein; executive producer, Laura Zucker. Presented by the Back Alley Theatre, 18221 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 8 p.m. Thu-Sat, 3:30 p.m. Sun, through March 15. Tickets: \$10-\$12. Reservations: (616) 780-2240 or (213) 851-9750.

Mary	.....	K Callan
Al	.....	John Carter
Homer	.....	Rick Dean
Duke	.....	Joe Ivy
Tommy	.....	Raphael Sbarge
Sarah	.....	Largo Woodruff

By Jack Viertel
Herald theater critic

As early as the late 1950s, publications like MAD magazine and playwrights like Edward Albee were telling us about the utter shallowness of suburban values. The paunchy fool in madras Bermudas holding a bunch of hot dogs over a patio barbecue is an image that most of us who grew up in that era lived with both in caricature and — if we were unlucky enough to actually live on the commuter line — in reality. But now it's 1984, and Richard Caliban's "Suburban Romance" at the Back Alley Theatre, is providing an update. The question that hangs over this play from beginning to end is: What's new? The answer, alas, is not much.

"Suburban Romance" details the lives of a middle-class family — conservative, frustrated father, faded-beauty mother, almost juvenile delinquent son and promiscuous daughter — and, yes, some of the details are very '80s. Daughter Sarah (Largo Woodruff) can talk openly about moving in with her synthesizer-playing boyfriend, and her parents don't throw her out of the house or burst into tears. But just as often the characters and their actions seem to be right out of the pages of Jean Kerr. Dad (John Carter) still goes off to play golf and tries to get his son (Raphael Sbarge) to enlist in the military, and there are jokes about how he's never heard of a diaphragm. The technique — monologues ending in blackouts blended with short conventional scenes — seems up-to-date, but in spirit, "Suburban Romance" seems like a revival.

Not that Caliban is without talent — his play boasts a few remarkable scenes, including a telling confrontation between mother and daughter in Act 2, and one genuinely bright idea: a talking dog. Duke, a suburban pooch if ever there was one, is played with slap-happy energy by Joe Ivy, and is the very embodiment of doghood: Chained outside the house, he never rises to human emotions, and even his vocabulary is limited to doggy pronouncements. If we're expecting the presence of this character to mean anything, we are disappointed. Duke seems to be here for comic relief. But it takes real skill to give an animal the gift of language without ever letting him seem like a human, and Caliban gives us a 100 percent dog, with or without dramatic purpose.

Allan Miller has provided some finely shaded direction for a group of gifted actors, especially Sbarge (late of "Risky Business"), whose stuttering, jumpy Tommy seems like a firecracker looking for a lethal place to explode. Don Llewellyn's set design and



Joe Ivy, left, as Duke the talking dog and Raphael Sbarge as Tommy in "Suburban Romance."

Barbara Metzbaum's costumes catch the bland temperament of suburban life and Pam Rank provides the right lighting. But the playwright's gifts, which are to be watched, are buried under the relentless familiarity of most of the material. In the evening's most telling monologue, the father discourses on the tough times he went through during the Depression. The words seem appropriate to a much older man, one who might have been expecting his first grandchild 10 or 20 years ago, not in the present. At the evening's conclusion, Caliban wraps up his various plot threads so neatly and so quickly that even he appears to have run out of interest, and one can only hope that this perfunctory treatment is symbolic of a hand-washing action. "Suburban Romance" introduces a writer who has his moments — let's hope he can find a better place to have them next time out.

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