

STAGE REVIEW

Feedlot

Back Alley Theatre, through June 28

Masculine sensibility and macho attitudes are both explored with incisive detail in Patrick Meyers' "Feedlot," which is being given a powerful production by Laure Zucker at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys. It is a very strong play in terms of theme, action and language, however, and it is not recommended for the squeamish.

The play is set in the control tower of a Texas feedlot (where cattle are brought to be fattened before the slaughter) and the action centers on two men who work there. Gene (Richard Cox) is a sensitive youth who also works with a local theatre group, and Billy (Joseph Ragno) is a macho stud whose wife has just left him and who is trying to drown his sorrow in booze. The two are uneasy co-workers and Billy sourly taunts Gene as being a "fag." During the course of the play, however, they both make unsettling discoveries about themselves and about each other.

The play develops an extremely intense and explosive situation, with Gene taking over the feedlot and threatening to blow it up in an effort to make an antisexist political statement. The action also includes forced homosexual rape (which is staged in the dark, but with realistic sounds) as Meyers' unmasks the true nature of both men. The final outcome seems to indicate that these men are not all that different in spite of their surface appearance of being complete opposites. The liberal is not all that noble and the redneck is not all that insensitive, or vice versa.

Director Allan Miller has mounted a stunning and compelling production, which unfolds naturally and with building tension. Cox and Ragno (who also played Billy in Circle Repertory production in New York) give superb performances that reveal the full complexities of these two characters.

Rounding out the cast in secondary roles of other feedlot workers are David Hanna, Tom Bower and Ed Morgan, all of whom create perfectly developed characterizations.

Technically, it's an impressive realistic production, with Patrick McFadden credited as "set consultant" for the excellent control tower setting, lighting by Cynthia Bishop and Stevens Pliska, costumes by Carolyn Allport, sound by Mark Shelley and music by Chris Allport.

"Feedlot" offers a highly intense riveting theatrical experience and it has a lot to say about men in modern society. It's one of the better productions currently playing in local theatres.

- Ron Pennington