

# ON STAGE/LOS ANGELES

## Suburban Romance

*Back Alley Theatre, through March 18*

"Suburban Romance" catches the Sunday-afternoon tenor of the suburbs: pleasant, bemused — but seething underneath.

Mary has moved out of her husband Al's bed into the den on what her family feels is the flimsy excuse: Al snores. Son Tommy is making a career out of getting fired from a succession of menial jobs. Daughter Sarah, a nurse, is making a career out of getting dumped by a succession of user-loser lovers. Al tries gamely to live up to the suburban ideal of paterfamilias and good provider but he doesn't understand any of the above.

In other hands, this could be a psychological drama replete with what passes for tooth and claw among the manicured backyards of the sleepier communities. But director Allan Miller has dealt with the material on everyday terms while teasing out the irony that hangs over this little acre like morning dew.

Playwright Richard Caliban, recipient of the Rockefeller Foundation's playwright-in-residence grant to the Back Alley, isn't mining any new lodes here and the device of set-piece monologues to the audience is sometimes distracting. Some of the monologues are striking, particularly the two where the kids share their dreams: Tommy's to be a sportscaster, Sarah's to be a ballerina living in a cottage in the forest. Sarah's first memory of her stuffed elephant is juxtaposed with her first sight of a real elephant. The shock of the encounter with the reality of her fantasy playmate is a finely wrought microcosm of the looming realities that wait outside the suburban barbecue pits.

Like crab grass, nothing can be plucked up and neatly thrown away. When Sarah goes off with her rock musician boyfriend Homer, his interest in marrying her is not reassuring. We never know exactly why Mary needs to sleep in the den for a while, perhaps because she doesn't exactly know, either. Maybe it's the only space she can make for herself in a world full of elephants. One loose end is tucked in when Tommy decides joining the Navy will be fun after all, bringing beams of relief to both parents.

The play ends on one of those rare

happy moments when a father can be sure something worthwhile has happened. His son Michael has named his first-born son for Al.

Caliban touches on the unconscious cruelties of family life: the father who jeers at his son's stuttering, the daughter who scorns her mother's limited existence. The play emphasizes the resilience of the bonds of family affection which are challenged by the bewildering changes in a society which threw out the rules in the middle of the game.

If the play sometimes seems one step beyond sitcom, a day in the life of suburbia, its humor, realism and tentative sense of some characters' inner mysteries alleviate these quibbles and indicate Caliban may be a writer to watch.

The production is well worth watching. K Callan expresses the confusion and withdrawal beneath the surface of the loving conservative housewife by a process of intuition that always finds its way home. It's hilarious to watch Raphael Sbarge's Tommy scrabbling his way out of adolescence with vitality and spunk. John Carter is a likable Al in the most thinly written of the roles.

Largo Woodruff, however, is not likable as the sullen nymphette Sarah. Though she has a wholesome suburban air, one wishes Woodruff found more facets in the role or that the playwright liked her character better. Rick Dean, meanwhile, is the perfect lusty, slack-jawed airhead musician; Joe Ivy is the best dog since Snoopy. The dog Duke (with the smiling bark) talks like Tarzan and gives the play a cartoon-strip ambience that symbolizes what it's about very well.

Don Llewellyn's set design and Pam Rank's lighting design are total pleasures. Barbara Metzenbaum designed appropriate costumes.

— Laura Hitchcock