

STAGE REVIEW

Putting on the Dog

Back Alley Theatre, indefinite run

There's no doubt that Frederick Bailey is a talented writer. He creates interesting, full-bodied characters and he develops a plot carefully and with a fine sense of unraveling mystery. He's also an excellent director and brings his script to life with fascinating detail.

Unfortunately, his latest play, "Putting on the Dog," which is currently being produced by Canyon Pictures in association with Laura Zucker and Allan Miller at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys, is too much performance detail and too little plot.

The play is basically a one-joke affair and really seems to be a very well-written situation comedy pilot. It concerns a group of people in a small town in New Mexico and their efforts to tell a lovable old lady that her driving is becoming a hazard to others. But everyone is afraid of offending her and incurring her wrath. Bailey drags this joke out for two acts and then in the final scene he offhandedly dismisses it and goes off on an entirely different tangent.

Bailey's direction serves to add a sense of substance, though, and he fleshes the thin plot out through intriguing pacing and outstanding characterizations. This almost works against the play, however, because one gets the feeling that something important is about to happen and, when it doesn't, the disappointment is even greater.

The cast is uniformly excellent, with Sylvia Meredith creating a strong center with her portrayal of the old lady who runs a boarding house and works in the local coffee shop. Bruce Wright is full of boyish charm and energy as a boarder who sweeps up at the police station and who is courting the old lady's young relative, who is staying with her. Christy Sinickas is very good in the latter role, as are Kurtwood Smith as the grumpy sheriff, Daniel Kremer as his deputy and Joe Clarke as another boarder who mentally is unbalanced. Steve Tobolowsky, William Utay and Bill Steis are fine in supporting roles, and Toodles, a cuddly black mutt, tends to steal scenes just by his presence.

Steis also designed the impressive set, which incorporates the parlor and kitchen of the boarding house, the sheriff's office and a strip of highway on the small stage. The uncredited lighting, with light cues attributed to Bill Lee, is first rate, as are the costumes assembled by Jeanne Van Cott.

— Ron Pennington