

THEATER REVIEW

Primal magic from a lean, crafty 'Fox'

By Jay Reiner

We have something special in our midst. "The Fox" is back, as lean and crafty as a few months ago, when it stole onto the Los Angeles theater scene in a superb production at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys. The play has taken up new lodgings at the larger, newly formed L.A. Stage Co. in Hollywood (the old Las Palmas Theater) and the results are the same as before. Only Better.

Moving a three-character play as subtle and intimate as "The Fox" to larger quarters has its risks. The fear was that Allan Miller's adaptation of the D.H. Lawrence novella would lose some of its intensity with too much space in which to breathe. Fear not; the fascination holds. Lawrence's story of two women who find their household in northern England invaded by a man just back from the war is an electrifying evening of theater.

No play is quite so potent as that written by a good writer trying to resolve intensely personal problems. Lawrence was always concerned with the relationship between the sexes: the emotional needs and interlocking fears and attractions of each gender. Lawrence was exploring how deep, how mysterious, how inevitable are



Michael Horton as Henry, Gretchen Corbett as Jill in Allan Miller's adaptation of D.H. Lawrence's "The Fox" at the L.A. Stage Co.

the currents of our sex-related behavior; how various and deceptive are the faces we wear and the roles we play to suit convention; and how strange are the ways devised to return to our natural selves.

Two of the actors in "The Fox," Michael Horton and Jenny O'Hara, are holdovers from the original production. The third, Gretchen Corbett, is new to the role of Jill, the "feminine" member of the pair, and she gives a memorable performance. Corbett is just what the play needed to make the move to a larger theater complete.

Corbett brings an immense vitality to her character as she bustles about

looking into everyone's needs, only too thrilled by the soldier's presence at first. But when Henry begins to threaten her relationship with Nell, Jill's tender manner gives way to suspicion, then finally breaks into open hostility. Lawrence would probably admit to the interchangeability of male-female roles on the level of work and play, but when sex and survival enter the picture his characters revert to primal patterns of behavior. Corbett plays a double octave of emotion and hits every note in between with precision. The actress is a pleasure to watch.

No one personifies the primal ele-

ment of behavior in the play better than Henry, the natural man. Henry lives on an almost instinctual level. His love of nature is deep and profound. He hunts, he hikes, he makes the hens lay eggs. When Henry is breaking down Nell's resistance in the woodshed, she finally opens up to him and he nuzzles her face and neck like an affectionate four-legged creature. Nell in turn makes little animal sounds when he begins to kiss her. So skillfully is the play written (and directed by Miller) and the penetrating mood sustained that these extravagant touches only lead us further into the chilling heart of the play.

Horton is totally believable as Henry, a force of nature to be wary of, definitely not to be tampered with. The actor has a disarming, boyish quality that dresses up his drive for domination and makes him all the more dangerous. We can see why Nell finds him all but impossible to resist.

It would be hard to imagine anyone playing the mannish Nell better than Jenny O'Hara. Nell is the pivotal character of the play, the one whose transformation cuts deepest. Caught between warring parts of her nature and the warring parties who surround her, O'Hara's reluctant turnabout is wrenched out of her character with uncommon depth.

The fine, spare farmhouse set (uncredited) is relatively unchanged from the previous production. Christopher Milliken's shadowy lighting and Hilary Sloane's costumes add immeasurably to the authentic feel of place and period. We have indeed something special in our midst. We have theatrical magic.

At the L.A. Stage Co., 1642 N. Las Palmas, Hollywood. 8:30 p.m. Tue-Fri, 7 and 10 p.m. Sat, 7:30 p.m. Sun. Tickets: \$10.50-\$14.50. Plays a limited engagement. Reservations: 461-2755.