



Gretchen Corbett, left, Jenny O'Hara and Michael Horton star in "The Fox" at L.A. Stage Company.

STAGE REVIEW

'THE FOX' DOESN'T LOSE ANYTHING IN TRANSFER TO LARGER THEATER

By DAN SULLIVAN, Times Theater Critic

Some plays lose command when transferred from a small theater to a larger one. Not "The Fox." It is as involving and disturbing at the mid-sized L.A. Stage Company in Hollywood as it was at the tiny Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys.

The city inspector who decided the Back Alley wasn't up to code has done this production a favor. It's ready for a wider audience—in fact, a national one. But for now "The Fox" is ours.

There were a few technical problems at the performance I saw last week—a sticking door latch, a distracting bounce of firelight off a wall. There also were moments when the actors seemed to be forcing their North Country accents. And the ending seemed a couple of beats too long.

Otherwise, satisfaction. Start

with Allan Miller's script. This is the rare adaptation that honors its source—here, D. H. Lawrence's short novel—while having the guts to depart from it. It is also a very sure piece of stage writing. An actor himself, Miller knows that words only fuel the scene. They aren't the whole fire. This "Fox" knows how to listen.

The story: Two women in their 30s are trying to make a life together on a lonely farm. Nellie (Jenny O'Hara) does the mucking-out, in men's clothes. Jill (Gretchen Corbett) does the tidying-up, in an apron. They love each other (perhaps not as lovers), but things are not going well outside. The hens aren't laying. A fox is troubling the farmyard—and also troubling Nellie's dreams.

One day a young soldier knocks on their door (Michael Horton). He

is just back from the Great War; he thought his grandfather still lived here. They invite him in for supper, then for the night, then for the rest of his furlough.

He is an engaging fellow, good company, and he has a sense for farm animals. He is also a good shot. He will fill their larder. Maybe he'll kill the fox.

Henry gets the hens back on schedule, brings in some pheasants and does bring down the fox. He also decides that he wants the free-striding Nellie for a wife. He will convince Nellie that a man is what she has really been dreaming about. And he will outwit the resourcefully passive Jill.

The characters, the isolated farmhouse, the struggle for power, are all from Lawrence. The language mostly is not, but might be: It

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has his ruthlessness. As in Lawrence, the ending is dark.

But Miller has some thoughts of his own about what is going on here. Who, for instance, is Henry? As in Lawrence, we see the high-hearted farmboy who looks everybody straight in the eye, and we sense the cunning hunter.

But where Lawrence sees Henry as basically an agent of the Life Force, taking Nellie to a healthier place, at the unfortunate expense of Jill, Miller has his doubts. (Perhaps his doubts about Lawrence, too.) Henry in the play is in the end a destroyer, probably psychotic.

If that flattens the story, it adds to its urgency as melodrama—a stage form that suits it very well. It also stirs questions about the connection between nature (as embodied by Henry and shunned by Jill, with Nellie stuck between) and evil.

At what point does the Life Force become the Death Force? Do men and women have different responsibilities in dealing with this? It is a play to argue about, argue *with*.

But not until after the show. In the playing, "The Fox" is a classically simple struggle. A and B both want C. Who will get her? Add to the geometry three fully explored characters, played by actors who know how they move and think.

Horton as Henry is so at ease in his skin that we're as

delighted with him at first, as the women are. Only gradually does it dawn on us that there's something almost demonic working here. Corbett's Jill begins as a nurturer (Henry reminds her of her brother), slowly turns hard as she starts suspecting something, too. We feel her panic, always a step behind the fox.

O'Hara is the mixed case as Nellie, torn between the satisfaction of providing for her friend and running with this strange man, who seems to be in touch with the wind. Her plight is felt, as is her indignation at being a *thing*, that two other people are trying to get. Of all the qualities that O'Hara conveys about Nellie, the strongest is her pride. (Some audiences will see Kathleen Lloyd in this role.)

Miller staged the play as well as wrote it. He and his players make sure that there's always something in the air between the three. Every moment in the play is either a question or an answer, and the need to know the final answer grows as we go deeper in.

The rough farmhouse set, credited to Christopher Milliken and a flock of others, is authentic. Hilary Sloane's costumes are simple and right. Milliken's lighting is a bit fussy. But there is very little to fault in "The Fox." It could move to a larger theater still.

"The Fox" plays Tuesdays through Fridays at 8:30 p.m., Saturdays at 7 and 10 p.m., and Sundays at 7:30 p.m., at the L.A. Stage Company (the old Las Palmas Theater), 1642 N. Las Palmas Ave. 461-2755.

THE FOX

Allan Miller's play, based on D. H. Lawrence's story, at the L.A. Stage Company. Producer Laura Zucker. Director Allan Miller. Lighting Christopher Milliken. Costumes Hilary Sloane. Set Milliken. Patrick McFadden, Zucker, Michael Wymore, Gary Lee. Production stage manager Michael Wymore. With Gretchen Corbett, Michael Horton and Jenny O'Hara.