

CALENDAR

STAGE REVIEW

A CASE OF SHIFTING REALITIES

By LAWRENCE CHRISTON

In "Are You Sure?" at the Back Alley Theatre, Sam Bobrick has used his considerable experience and dexterity as a playwright to thread the lines between the indefinite categories of reality and fantasy, gamesmanship and seriousness, even between theater and fact.

How tantalizing "Are You Sure?" really can be is hard to tell, though; in this production the play wants to float, but the players want to nail it down.

Bobrick is best known as a commercial writer, which is to say he prefers a smoothed-out medium to a thorny message. His "Norman, Is That You?" and "Murder at the Howard Johnsons" are dinner-theater staples. But in "Are You Sure?" we realize that he's a good deal more clever than he's let on; his role as entertainer has distracted us from his subtler teasing at the relationship between illusory appearance and real response.

"Are You Sure?" is a rondo on that theme, a play in the purest sense of the word. At rise, we see a *soignee*-looking Caroline languishing on a sofa, reading. Her husband David glances at her furtively and pours a mysterious powder in a glass of wine before offering it to her. "I won't drink it," she says, with surprising casualness. "You've poisoned it again."

In a few short lines it's suggested that David wants to murder her for her money. "Why do you make me beg for everything?" he complains. To prove her wrong, he slugs down



ED KRIEGER

Ronny Cox and Lois Nettleton in Sam Bobrick's "Are You Sure?"

the drink and collapses. The young maid, Marie, enters, sees his body and screams. Caroline reads on, unperturbed. In a minute, David will rise and Marie will enter—an older, different Marie.

The scene is a keynote. It hasn't happened in the real sense: No one has actually died. It's happened in someone's mind, probably in Caroline's, though a case can be made for David's as well, since suicide is the

masochist's ultimate triumph over himself.

The scene has been set up humorously too. The one-liners spoof innumerable murder-mysteries as well as the oversaturated genre of domestic misery. Those elements continue throughout, with the young maid reappearing in a variety of guises, fantasy murders poured

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BOBRICK: 'ARE YOU SURE?' AT BACK ALLEY

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out of someone's mind onto the stage, a wry satirical touch added to an unreality that becomes so great that periodically the main characters will have to stop and ask themselves, along with the audience, "Whose play is this anyway?"

Jeffrey Haddow's Charlie, cast and re-cast as detective, former husband to Caroline and friend, is the character most victimized by these vertiginous, shifting realities. When Haddow is on stage, the play finds its elusive tone's proper pitch. When he's off, it's a dud.

The dramatic answer to "Are You Sure?" is "No, we're not." Director Allan Miller has decided to ignore the light-footedness of people who can never be absolutely certain of where they are, or even who they are, and so his competent cast, consisting of Lois Nettleton, Ronny Cox, Jack Collins, Catherine McLeod and Ellen Moxted, punch their way along at war with a play that literally outwits its production.

It may be that "Are You Sure's" conscious disavowal of a coherent center is unnerving to a group of actors who are more comfortable developing their characters out of a naturalistic core, or that Miller, all of whose major work has been in heavier drama, hasn't been able to shift gears to lighten the load.

"Are You Sure's" confusions are so deliberate that it's hard to determine why it runs aground. Haddow offers a clue in his series of subtle parodies that runs from Dan Duryea to Humphrey Bogart to Columbo, all suggested, never fleshed out. Haddow's gentle self-mockery

implies that the best way to cloak confusion is with style.

The production design doesn't help. Steve Zinn's lighting is uncertain, Jim Billings' set is conspicuously and erroneously impoverished and Hilary Sloane's costumes don't match up. Performances at 8 p.m. Thursdays through Sundays at 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 780-2240, through March 27.

OPENINGS

ART
CRAFT AND FOLK ART MUSEUM (5814 Wilshire Blvd.), "Handsome in Nepal" and "Four Villages: Architecture in Nepal." Ends May 22.

MUSIC
JO ANN SMITH, piano; faculty ensemble (Roy O. Disney Hall, CalArts, 8 p.m.), Free.
TRIO DI MILANO (Music Guild), (Wilshire Ebell Theatre, 8:30 p.m.).
UCLA SYMPHONY, Samuel Krachmalnick, conductor; Adrienne Grossman, cello (Schoenberg Hall, UCLA, 8:30 p.m.).

POP MUSIC
RAY CAMPI (Lingerie, Hollywood, 9 p.m.).
POWDER BLUES (Central, Hollywood, 9 p.m.).
JOHNNY LYON (Filthy McNasty's, North Hollywood, 9 p.m.).
PRIVATE STOCK (Hop Singh's, Marina del Rey, 9 p.m.).
DEBBIE HOLLAND, LAURA ZAMBO (At My Place, Santa Monica, 9 p.m.).
MODERN SOUNDS OP QUIET (Madame Wong's West, 9 p.m.).
FULL SWING (Vine Street Bar and Grill, Hollywood, 9 p.m.). Through Sat.

STAGE
MARCEL MARCEAU (Ambassador Auditorium, 300 W. Green St., Pasadena, 304-6161). Mime. Today and Thur. only, 8 p.m.

'DEATH IN VENICE' POSTPONED

Three March performances of Britten's "Death in Venice" by the Long Beach Grand Opera have been postponed until fall, due to an accumulated deficit of \$51,000, according to opera president Keith Polakoff.

At a recent emergency session of the board of trustees, it was decided that, due to "the combined

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