

STAGE BEAT

'SUBURBAN ROMANCE' AT BACK ALLEY

By DON SHIRLEY

The Back Alley Theatre and Richard Caliban's "Suburban Romance" were made for each other. The theater is near the center of that archetypal suburb, the San Fernando Valley; the play examines a family that might well live there. Fortunately, Caliban neither flatters nor lampoons his characters. Their real-life counterparts should eat up "Suburban Romance," because Caliban understands.

He entertains, too. "Suburban Romance" is not original or provocative, but it offers a respectable quota of genial laughter. The family consists of Mom and Dad, a girl-woman, a boy whom Dad thinks should be a man, and Duke the dog. The words they speak (even Duke's) sound realistic to the point of blandness; they haven't been filtered to reflect a distinctive sensibility—if, in fact, the author has one. But they do express well what the characters have to say.

In the first act, that isn't much. But the second act reveals that each character—from Dad to Duke—longs to break loose. The third act resolves these longings in a way that might look contrived on paper but that seems wonderfully natural in Allan Miller's staging at the Back Alley.

The play couldn't have been better cast. As Mom, K Callan seldom complains, but her face suggests a laundry list of unspoken troubles. Her daughter Sarah complains a lot—enabling us to know more of what's going on inside her—and Largo Woodruff's performance helps make Sarah the most developed of the characters. As Tommy, a 20-year-old adolescent, Raphael Sbarge is a virtuoso of the art of restlessness.

The roles of Dad and Homer (Sarah's boyfriend) are so depersonalized in the writing that they almost seem generic, but John Carter and Rick Dean do what they can. There can be no complaints about Joe Ivy's Duke; I can't recall a funnier or more accurate impersonation of a faithful family pooch.

Don Llewelyn's set is all plastic grass and lattice, with spaces that are well defined by Pam Rank's lighting. Barbara Metzenbaum's costumes look appropriately off-the-rack, with the exception of Duke's spotted trousers.

Performances at 15231 Burbank Blvd. Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 3:30 p.m., through March 18 (780-2240).