

# TUESDAY/CALENDAR

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Part VI

## STAGE REVIEW

### LAWRENCE'S 'THE FOX' AT THE BACK ALLEY

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**T**he Fox," D.H. Lawrence's tale, takes as its central proposition the intrusion of a man on the friendship of two women. For most writers, that would be a cue for comedy. For Lawrence, it's the first step on a path of destruction. Sexual tensions and symbols are his preoccupation.

What emerges in Allan Miller's adaptation of "The Fox" at his Back Alley Theater is a Pinteresque reticence full of unspoken fears.

The stageworthiness of Miller's script (he also has directed) succeeds by snaring precisely those elements in the novella that are dramatically charged to the point of explosion. Re-creating this Gordian knot of love and dependence on a desolate North Country farm was an apparent process of elimination and reinforcement. Remove extraneous language, strengthen the harshness of the physical and psychological climates and trap the symbolism. The skill is all.

Nellie (Jenny O'Hara) and Jill

(Margaret Ladd) have taken refuge from a confusing world in the remoteness of an unyielding bit of acreage. It surrenders nothing without exacting some terrible price—in labor, in the deadening of emotions, in constricting isolation. The women are close (though the nature of their bond is unclear) and the refuge is becoming prison. Jill, the weaker one, is weakening. Can they endure another winter? Yes, says Nellie, more able-bodied and antisocial. Why not go back to Islington, says Jill. She is reminded that Islington is what they got away from.

In walks Henry Grenfel (Michael Horton), a smiling soldier boy home from the wars. His grandpa owned this farm. Do they know where he might be? He's dead, but the soldier is welcome to stay for some tea—and then simply to stay.

All would be well, if the tranquility of a sterile but steady existence

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*Jenny O'Hara (Nellie) and Margaret Ladd (Jill) star with Michael Horton (Henry) in adaptation of "The Fox" at the Back Alley Theater.*

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were not suddenly ruffled. There are ripples in the pond, a whole new range of emotions to accommodate. Henry wants, Henry needs, Henry wills. There is resistance and submission, attraction and fear. At first the male hunts and nourishes. Then he shoots and kills. The fox is in the henhouse, stalking, and it's more than imagery that is there for the plucking.

Adapter-director Miller has been as selective in his staging as his writing. The script is tautly coiled. It moves deliberately, but with stealth. Perhaps Miller's greatest wisdom was in the casting of the play.

At the top of the list is O'Hara's Nellie, a stronghold of repressed emotion under siege. How can she resist Henry's boyish game plans and still keep faith with Jill? He's everything she yearns to be and can't—unshackled, joyous, an Ariel at one with nature. Or so it seems. But Jill, with everything to lose, begins to see his darker side, greedy and violent. In Ladd's remarkable performance, we track her impotence by the increasing stridency in her voice, and her despair by the petulance of her actions, as they grow meaner, more parasitical. She's losing in earnest. The portraits dovetail into vivid and startling interaction.

Hilary Sloan has dressed everyone with a rectitude that makes untidy emotions seem all the more buttoned up. Christopher Milliken's shadowy lighting helps, but the uncredited farmhouse setting (Patrick McFadden, who has designed many sets in this town, is listed only as master carpenter) is too carefully manicured for the primitive conditions of life in the play. Hardwood floors were never a part of it and something rough and wild is lost forever in its relative comfort. Still, it's a magnetic evening.

Performances at the Back Alley, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, run Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. until May 9 (780-2240).

