

56 The theater critics loved "The Fox," hated "Come Blow Your Horn," loved "Nuts," hated "Poppa," loved "Mates," hated

CALENDAR

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STAGE By DAN SULLIVAN

What kind of a year was it for the Los Angeles stage? Busy, certainly. Times reviewers visited 425 local productions, most claiming to be professional. We probably declined at least that many other invitations. The volume was there. The quality was there as well. Not every night, but often enough to keep up our energy. (A good show always seems to come along just when you need one.) If more junk got done than usual, the long-term rise in production values continued.

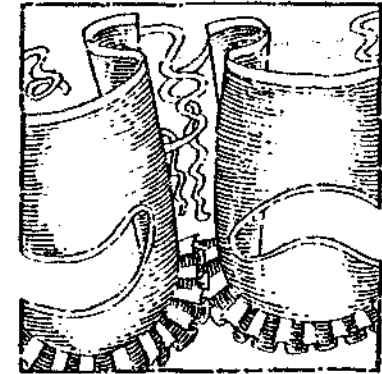
A year-end checklist of worthy achievements would stretch from Tom Taylor's tender-sly portrayal of Woody Guthrie last winter at the Westwood, to William Ritman's elegant small-town set for "Morning's at Seven" last week at the Ahmanson. And how could you leave out the acting in "Morning's at Seven"? But that's the trouble with lists. Someone always gets left out.

This year we're going to try to convey the sense of the season in another way. Each member of The Times' reviewing staff will discuss two shows, only—one that best represents the drive for excellence in Los Angeles theater these days, and one that best demonstrates how tacky our stage still can be.

"The Fox" was, for me, the most encouraging show of the year. This was a stage version of D.H. Lawrence's short novel about two women trying to run a farm together and a soldier who drives them apart. Its satisfactions started with Allan Miller's script, which found a language for Lawrence's people (there wasn't much dialogue in the book) but which also dared to see them differently than their author had. Particularly the soldier, who emerged as a darker and more destructive figure. This made it a more primitive tale than Lawrence had written—more of a melodrama, if you like. But it was as rich in harmonics, and it took beautifully to the stage.

The performances were as plangent as the writing. Gretchen Corbett and Jenny O'Hara marked every shift, every uneasiness, between the two housemates. And Michael Horton, the invader, blended cheerfulness and rapine in a particularly unsettling way. Under Miller's direction, the three actors not only built living characters, they created living moments, whose upshot couldn't be calculated in advance. You truly didn't know where this play was going to go, and the end was a shock. Yet it had its awful logic.

The only disappointment was that "The Fox" failed to catch on when it moved from the small Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys to the mid-sized L.A. Stage Co. in Hollywood. That it made the transfer was a good sign, however. And there continues to be talk about a New York production. We haven't seen the last of "The Fox."



Michael Horton, Gretchen Corbett starred in "The Fox" at L.A. Stage Co.