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## STAGE REVIEWS

## 'PASSION PLAYS' AT ENSEMBLE STUDIO

By ROBERT KOEHLER

When the West Coast branch of the Ensemble Studio Theatre opened here in March of last year, its maiden voyage was an amalgam of seven short plays bound together by the theme of power. The theme that binds this year's groups of short works is passion, which isn't much of a jump from power. As the best works in "Passion Plays" show, those made vulnerable by their inner passion assert power beyond all reason, or surrender it all in a moment of self-abnegation.

Passionate excess can stir the inspirational heart of the coldest playwright, but in those of more warmth, it can tempt them into artistic mimicry of their characters' antics. Excess, sad to say, is in excess in this first set of the 14-play series.

The primary reason why Laura Fanning's "Somewhere Close to Texas" connects with us is the distance and control she applies to a monstrously difficult subject: the disappearance and death of a young American (David Morgan Potts) lost in the deadly Central American maze. All that his mother, the ever-eloquent Edith Fields, knows is that he got some funny idea in his head to come down here. One moment, Fields is every well-intentioned but strangely ignorant American who thinks that "this isn't really a war;" the next moment, an American officer hands her his clothes, and the war comes home.

But Fanning expresses the Latin-American literary tradition of absurdism as well, with a poem by a *campesino* right out of Cesar Vallejo (which a—Salvadoran? Guatemalan?—officer revealingly chides) and the son's blackly comic monologue beyond the grave. She latches onto a lot of ideas and nicely compresses them. Eduardo Machado has directed to emphasize the sense of the characters as witnesses to horror.

LARRY DAVIS / Los Angeles Times



Eileen Heckart accepts birthday gift from delivery boy Jeffrey Marcus in "Meals on Wheels."

## 'HOT &amp; COLD': TEN PLAYS AT BACK ALLEY

By LAWRENCE CHRISTON

Brevity is the principal virtue of "Hot & Cold," the program of one-act plays that have graduated to the main stage from the Back Alley theater's Writers Lab. Ten plays make up the series, and the Back Alley directors and writers have seen to it that not one of them dawdles. Conversely, few of them possess any

degree of incisiveness.

The majority of the plays spring out of one-note themes, some of which take their sprinter's dash to go as far as they can, and some of which abort the moment that they puncture a surface or offer an intriguing prospect. Terry Kinglsey-Smith's "Meals on Wheels" is based on that antiquated sure-fire laugh-getter, the notion that an old lady can be foul-mouthed and horny. Jim McGinn's "June Bride" is miffed that she's retained her virginity while everyone else around her was losing theirs. Karen Weiss Rasskind's "Eye to Eye" adds an '80s feminist overlay to the '60s image of a lovable female kook, and with it the disagreeable notion that a woman's self-expression is gained through male emasculation. (Woman seduces man in doctor's office and says, "Don't worry, I'll be gentle.")

Gary Socol's opening playlet, "Chilly Revelations," which deals with what two people disclose about themselves over a game of Scrabble, is a keynote for the sure-handedness with which the plays have been written. Vallie Ullman's face-to-face introduction of a black man and a white Jewish lady in "Ruby and Samuel" happens only after they've been so cleverly implicated with each other beforehand that we wish the play could stay around so that we can see what happens when things get serious, as surely they must. Iris Rainer Dart's breathless adolescents in "Bee Bee Gordon Does It Again" are beautifully captured, and director Allan Miller (one of the evening's five) sees to it that Brooke David Kofford's "The Hunting Season" has its comedic intensity vigorously fulfilled.

And its anger. "The Hunting Season" has it in for wallet-gouging doctors ("Doctors . . . and their condos where they keep their mothers"), and alone is an indication of what the price of "Hot & Cold's" sickness exacts by way of passion and personal point of view. The cast of 10, headed by Eileen Heckart, is impeccably bright, and the program as a whole has an undeniable sparkle as well. Still, one misses the shadow of a thought hovering here and there over the general picnic merriment, and somewhere the sound of a playwright's ax grinding.

Performances Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. (be on time or you'll be shut out), with a Sunday 3:30 p.m. matinee, at 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, (851-9750) through Nov. 20.

## LA Times HOT &amp; COLD Review



Clipped By:

laura\_zucker

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