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'FEEDLOT' OPENS AT BACK ALLEY

By DAN SULLIVAN
Times Theater Critic

A feedlot is where cattle are brought in from the range to be fattened up before the kill. Patrick Meyers' "Feedlot" at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys is set in the "control tower" of such a place, a sterile metal room that might be the command post for a moon shot.

The livestock below are fed by pushing a button. One doesn't touch them. We're not sure from the set (Patrick McFadden is listed as "set consultant") whether one even sees them. It's a surprisingly abstract space, like an antechamber in a Racine play.

Meyer's story, too, seems a bit unreal, like something his troubled young hero might fantasize over a long, lonely night shift.

His name is Gene, and he is somewhat suspect at the feedlot for being interested in the theater. Some of the men think he's gay. This bothers no one but Billy Fred, who is very tough and a little short.

Billy Fred (Joseph Ragno) baits Gene (Richard Cox) a lot—nasty bullyboy stuff. But one night they have the late shift together and the worm turns. First Gene tricks Billy Fred into revealing his own homosexual tendencies. Then he pulls a gun on him, threatening to blow them both (and the silo) sky-high, as a protest against "male oppression."

Then—lights down—he forces Billy Fred to submit to him sexually. Lights up, and Gene is contrite: he has acted

the role of the male oppressor himself. But Billy Fred seems to have learned his lesson, and starts talking, friendly-like, about trout fishing. Is it a ploy to get the gun back from Gene? Apparently not, for he doesn't use it when he gets it.

Peace through rape? "Feedlot" confuses us, for while it seems to agonize over the male urge to humble the other guy, it also seems to approve—at least in special cases. Take out the sexual component, and you have a Boy's Life story about the sissy who beat up the bully, after which they got to be friends.

Take out the idealism, however, and you have the scenario for an S-M film. "Feedlot" is obviously serious, obviously written from the gut, but the schematic quality of the conflict is oddly matched against an unclarity of final statement, at least in this production, directed by Allan Miller.

I saw it at a final preview, which lacked line. Cox as the sensitive one and Ragno as the macho one seemed busier with portraiture than interaction. We knew who each was—the script tends to underline it—but rarely felt the situation taking over. Ragno's shaken "That was bad" after the attack was, finally, instinct talking.

Less rests on the other characters in the play, their co-workers at the lot, and perhaps for that reason David Hanna, Tom Bower and Ed Morgan seemed less busy projecting inner discoveries, more available to the moment.

"Feedlot" plays at 8 Thursdays-Saturdays at the Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. 780-2240. Closes June 28.

'FEEDLOT'

Patrick Meyers' play, at the Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. Producer Laura Zucker. Director Allan Miller. Set consultant Patrick McFadden. Lighting Cynthia Bishop and Stevens Pliska. Costumes Carolyn Allport. Sound Mark Shelley. Music Chris Allport. With Richard Cox, Joseph Ragno, Tom Bower, Ed Morgan, David Hanna.

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