

# SHOWBIZ<sup>West</sup>

July 31 — August 13, 1980

## LEGIT REVIEWS

### PUTTING ON THE DOG

(Canyon)

When the show poster told me, "I wanted to write a play that would make people happy," I expected an evening of fluff. Frederick Bailey's "Putting on the Dog" is surprisingly good fluff. Rather than insipidly avoiding any human conflict, Bailey wrote simple people in amusing situations, cast charming actors, and directed a production of such vitality that its sheer energy and joy entertain an audience.

His main character, Iowa, runs a boarding house in Friote Canyon, New Mexico. She's grown old and drives dangerously, but nobody in town wants to upset her with a traffic citation. Written as a Ruth Gordon type, Sylvia Meredith's portrayal is flat. She kills her laughs by de-emphasizing her punch lines. Two of her boarders, Don (Bruce Wright) and Dorothy (Christy Sinkas) attract one another. When he breaks a date with her, she goes out with Romero (played sincerely, but excessively greasy by William Utay) to make him jealous. It works and, at the final curtain, Don and Dorothy head for happily-ever-after-land.

Wright's performance constantly delights with its ingenuous enthusiasm. Sinkas is well cast, but inexperienced. The other two boarders are Officer Kinkaid (played with a simplicity that covers considerable craft by Daniel Kramer) and Gus, a mental retard. Joe Clarke's broad characterization would be too much except that everything he does comes from the soul. The final scene, though over-written, is touching. Kurtwood Smith has a fine line to walk as Sheriff Chandler. On the one hand he's a selfish coward who terrorizes an innocent man, but can't serve the ticket to Iowa. On the other, he remains as lovable as everyone else in the villainless play. It's a beautiful performance. Not to be overlooked is Toodles, as Puppydog. She appears involved in the action without upstaging the humans. In smaller roles Steve Tobolowsky and Bill Steis are excellent.

Steis also designed a set which manages to cram several acting areas into very small spaces without interfering with traffic, a major achievement. Jeanne Van Cott's costumes add a dimension to each of the characters.

"Putting on the Dog" proves that a simple romantic comedy doesn't have to be mindless to be enjoyable. It plays at the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, Thurs.-Sun. at 3:00. 730-2240.

—Joel Asher