

Small theaters stage lively alternatives to official fest

By Paul Lasley and Elizabeth Harryman

Los Angeles

If you arrive in Los Angeles for the Summer Games, only to find tickets to the much-publicized Olympic Arts Festival sold out, don't despair. Southern California is brimming with theatrical activity, and many theaters not officially part of the festival are offering exciting fare to residents and visitors alike.

A quick example? The late Gower Champion's award-winning musical "42nd Street," with its snappy tap dances and nostalgic charm, is delighting audiences at the popular Shubert Theater in Los Angeles.

To find some of the most exciting performances in the city, however, the adventurous playgoer should explore the world of smaller theaters.

In addition to the eight or 10 legitimate Equity houses, the city boasts some 165 "Equity waiver" theaters, so-called because Actors Equity Association waives jurisdiction over theaters with 99 seats or less. These stages enable professional actors to work for low or no pay in order to showcase themselves or for sheer love of the art. Thus audiences have a chance to see talented newcomers or catch their favorite film or television stars in challenging roles they might not otherwise play. Much of the work is experimental, but these smaller stages provide some of the best and most innovative evenings of theater in town.

One such exciting stage is the Back Alley Theater in the San Fernando Valley. Here audiences can see "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?", Eric Bentley's play about the investigations conducted by the House Un-American Activities

Committee in the 1950s. Boasting some of the city's best acting, directing, and producing talent, this drama — based on actual congressional transcripts — offers a fascinating insight into a controversial period in American history.

The production is but the latest in a string of successes for the Back Alley. Founded in 1979 by co-producing directors Laura Zucker and Allan Miller, the tiny theater has spawned two productions that have gone on to play in larger houses.

A stunning dramatic piece, "After Crystal Night," is playing at the Melrose Theater in Hollywood.

Authored by screenwriter John Herman Shaner ("Goin' South," "The Man From Uncle") and directed by "Hill Street Blues" resident director Corey Allen, the play fo-

cus on a present-day Jewish family's attempts to deal with echoes of the Nazi holocaust. The production offers audiences some of L.A.'s finest actors doing superb work in a powerful, thought-provoking drama.

The oldest Equity-waiver theater in Los Angeles — in fact, the oldest repertory theater — is The Company of Angels, founded in 1958. Also located in Hollywood, it will be playing a revival of Clifford Odets's 1938 drama, "Rocket to the Moon." This turbulent story of people searching for love and happiness has been described by theater sage Harold Clurman as Odets's best play. The Company of Angels production is being directed by Tony Morina and features Greg Mulavey (from television's "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman") and Sarah Bartlett.

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