

STAGE/REVIEW

The 'Sweet' life of popular success

By Daniell Roter

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The successful production of "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys is heading into the home stretch after being

granted a two-month extension. But even as it winds down, the house is packed.

"We're sold out every night," said theater co-owner Laura Zucker about the hit production. The play opened July 6 and was

originally scheduled to close Aug. 18.

"We could keep going, but we're not in the business of doing Bleacher Bums" (now going into its fifth year at the Burbage Theater), and our next

show will be ready," said Zucker. "In the Sweet Bye Bye," written by Donald Driver will play through Oct. 13. A look like word-of-mouth — lifeblood of Equity-waiver success — will keep the B



RUE McCLANAHAN
"In the Sweet Bye and Bye"

Alley seats filled.

And it's not just the audiences that love Driver's unsentimental domestic comedy. Rue McClanahan, who co-stars with John Anderson, is determined to stick with the production through its extended run, despite the fact that she has already started five-days-a-week taping of a new television comedy, "The Golden Girls," along with Bea Arthur, Betty White and Estelle Getty.

"Television isn't all that satisfying for an actor, and a show is over in five days," said McClanahan. "On the weekends I get to go to the Back Alley and play Jessie."

The actress describes Jessie, her stage character, as "a spiritual woman seeking answers to life and death. She's unkempt and not attractive, but in love with her husband." Jessie is also completely different than the character McClanahan plays on "The Golden Girls," whom she described as "an over-50 Southern femme-fatale, man-crazy, dates anything in sight."

Much of the charm of "In the Sweet Bye and Bye," some say, lies in the believability of its middle-aged characters, a rarity on screen and on the stage. Getting older is not good for an actor's career, especially a female actor. McClanahan, who currently finds herself in the enviable position of having two plum older-leading-lady roles, thinks attitudes and, consequently, employment trends, may be changing.

"Usually older actors play supporting parts, and the leads are in their 20s and 30s. Now, with "Golden Pond" and "Cocoon," that seems to be changing — there does seem to be a movement underfoot," she said.

And the people who come to "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" are responding. "People wait around to tell me how much they love the show and how good it makes them feel," noted McClanahan with satisfaction. "So many come up and say they know somebody just like that."

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