

## 'Sweet Bye and Bye' rings true when it comes to portraying life

By Jay Reiner

Daily News Theater Critic

**D**onald Driver's "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" is a beautiful, unsentimental comedy filled with enough laughs, surprises and wry insights into human nature to make your heart turn a dozen somersaults.

The play revolves around Hagen and Jessie (John Anderson and Rue McClanahan), a long-married couple living none-too-happily together in a small Oregon town. Hagen, a sawmill worker, has been unemployed for three years and is thinking of moving to Canada. He also has been sleeping with his sister-in-law, Neva (K Callan), every Wednesday night while Jessie goes to her prayer meetings.

As for Jessie, she feels life has passed her by, which helps explain her mammoth collection of exotic travel brochures and her dream of a better life to come in the sweet bye and bye.

But before she can get there, she has to make it through this life, and apparently it isn't that easy for her. When we first meet Jessie, she's just returned from a funeral where she's taken her usual leap into the open grave of a recently departed friend. Another strange thing: Jessie has an old telephone switchboard sitting in her front parlor (she used to be an operator) that she uses to talk to her friend Edna whenever she feels the need — only Edna happens to be as dead as the party Jessie just said goodbye to.

Other characters are Carmel (Rebecca Gilchrist), an alcoholic nurse who has had a mastectomy; Bill Leland (Christopher Murray), Hagen and Jessie's adopted son who may or may not have a metal plate in his head and who is also an alcoholic and speaks not a line of dialogue all evening long; and Lamar Shoolee (Gene Ross), a friend of the family. Finally, there's Jessie's mother and a busybody named Myrtle, two characters who don't materialize in the flesh but have plenty to say about everything that happens.

What happens to these wonderful characters is simply life. They argue, they gossip, they keep secrets, they lie — and they also find time to tell the truth about themselves and, in their own ways, love each other. The play has some of the truest, funniest dialogue you'll ever hear, and a few of the scenes will reduce you to laughter and tears at the same time.

The actors, under Allan Miller's brisk direction, are so well-suited to their roles it's a pleasure to watch them work. There isn't a false note struck all evening long, and McClanahan, Anderson and Callan offer three of the finest portrayals in memory, recent or otherwise. This is the sort of production that restores one's faith in the theater.

"In the Sweet Bye and Bye" is playing at the Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. Performances are Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 3 and 8 p.m., through Aug. 18. Tickets are \$12 to \$14. For reservations, call (818) 780-2240.



Rue McClanahan and John Anderson play a long-married couple in "In the Sweet Bye and Bye."