

CRITICS' CHOICE

18 L.A. Life, Daily News—July 2, 1986

STAGE

'Peanut': more than the shell of childhood

By Tom Jacobs

Daily News Theater Critic

'Unique" is too often used to describe things that are not. But in the case of Donald Margulies' superb drama "Found a Peanut," which is currently in its West Coast premiere at the Back Alley Theatre, the term seems justified.

Consider: It's unlikely there has ever been a play that looks at the world of children from a hard-edged, non-sentimental point of view, or one that dramatized the trauma and pain of childhood with such immediacy and impact.

And it's equally unlikely that this fascinating material could be presented more compellingly than it is in Michael Arabian's sensitive, energetic production.

No bemused reflection

Even though playwright Margulies set the action in Brooklyn in 1962 and is thus remembering his own childhood, there's no sense of bemused reflection here. From the moment we see Rich Rose's superb, stark set, we realize that nothing here has been filtered through the gauze of selective nostalgia.

This feeling is borne out as the one-act, 90-minute play runs its course. Not a lot happens, really: One kid (they range in age from 5 to 14) finds a dead bird; another finds a bag containing \$68; a third loses a key. But though these troubles may seem trivial to adults, they are major, important events in the lives of the characters — and since we experience them through the youngsters' eyes, they seem terribly urgent to us, too. This makes for several scenes of considerable dramatic impact, particularly when two thugs arrive and disturb the serenity of the younger kids' little world.

Emotions captured

Margulies has captured the way children's emotions can change from anger to laughter to boredom in a few seconds.

On a deeper level, Margulies offers a portrait of a group of people groping to sort out their attitudes toward death, toward right and wrong, and above all toward themselves. Watching them react to one another — assuming positions of leadership, backing off, showing courage, betraying confidences — you begin to realize how strongly our childhood experiences shape our adult personalities.

None of this would work, of course, if the adult actors weren't absolutely convincing as kids — which they all are at the Back Alley. Director Arabian's production captures the physicality of a child's world — the actors, like most kids, do a lot of running around and climbing fences.

Three actors do particularly fine work: Lycia Naff as the quintessential little sister; William DeAcutis as the nerdy Jeffrey Smolowitz; and Leslie Jordan as 5-year-old Little Earl, the youngest child we meet.

DeAcutis avoids all the cliches playing a character who is continually picked on or ignored, and when the bullies bash him against a fence and steal his rubber ball, his physical and emotional pain seems very, very real. His performance underlines Margulies' point: that this world is in many ways a reflection of the adult world, and neither is very pretty.

STAGEVIEW

- The play: "Found a Peanut."
- Where: Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.
- When: 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, 3 and 8 p.m. Sunday, indefinitely.
- Starring: David O. Cameron, William DeAcutis, Lycia Naff, Winifred Freedman, Leslie Jordan and Jeffrey Rogers.
- Behind the scenes: Written by Donald Margulies. Directed by Michael Arabian.
- Tickets: \$13 to \$15. Call (818) 780-2240.
- Our rating: A

L.A. Life, Daily News—July 4, 1986 3

Your guide to the best this weekend has to offer

THEATER



"Peanut" actors, from left, Lycia Naff, William DeAcutis and Jeffrey Rogers.

Adult actors up to the task of probing childhood issues

Were our childhoods as idyllic as most of us remember them? Are our personalities pretty well defined early in life? What is it really like to be a child? Playwright Donald Margulies asks these provocative questions in his unique "Found a Peanut," currently playing at the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.

Michael Arabian's vivid, energetic

production shows us a couple of hours in a Brooklyn back yard in 1962. Adult actors do an amazingly convincing job portraying characters ranging in age from 5 to 14.

Performances are at 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday and at 3 and 8 p.m. Sunday. For tickets, call (818) 780-2240.

— Tom Jacobs