

Growing pains, laughs are theme of 'Slab Boys' play

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Set in a carpet factory in 1957 Scotland, the action in "Slab Boys" could take place in any factory in the United States today.

"Slab Boys" is a play about growing up, facing reality and the future. It is often humorous, often violent.

Closed in inside a small, paint-smelling room are three volatile "slab boys," paint mixers in a design studio. Each is coming to conclusions and choices about his life.

Spanky, played in a low-key manner by Christopher Michael Moore, is realizing that he never will be elevated above his position. He is the most complacent of the three and often acts as a mediator in the endless rounds of battle.

Hector is a true wimp. James LeGros plays him as a pathetic man-child who wants to be an adult but who doesn't have the savvy to do it.

The most emotional, and interesting, of the three is Phil. With his crazy mother and his strong dislike of his job serving as the character's background, Dennis Christopher (from "Breaking Away") delivers the play's strongest performance.

He is a man on the edge, just waiting to be sent over. His humor and seeming apathy barely conceal a troubled and disturbed personality.

The play revolves around these three, with assorted other co-workers thrown in as straight men. Bob McCracken plays the pimply Jack Hogg, who is greeted by

a cascade of powdered paints whenever he enters the room. John H. Fields is great as the boss, Curry, who always is blowing his whistle and hassling the fellas.

Catherine Harper is especially funny as Lucille, a perfect send-up of the bomb-shell receptionist, and the object of wimpy Hector's desire. Some of the play's funniest moments come when the guys try to help Hector gain his true love.

Completing the group are Michael Covert, who as the new guy, Alan, is the butt of many jokes, and provides an air of competition for the guys. Sadie, the tea lady, played by Zelda Rubinstein, offers yet another character on whom the boys vent their frustrations.

And they have many frustrations, both at work and at home, all of which are woven into the action of the play.

"Slab Boys" seems funny on the surface, but scratch a little deeper and something more serious is revealed. Human beings facing their individual forks in the road are viewed as they make these crucial, and at times painful, decisions.

More than just a parody of people unhappy in their work and life, "Slab Boys" hits very close to home. It pokes where it hurts the most — the desire for a meaningful life, one that involves a good job, happy home life and self-pride.

"Slab Boys" is playing at the Back Alley Theatre Van Nuys through Nov. 28. Running in repertory with "Thin Walls," it is presented Monday through Wednesday and Saturday.