



Rebecca Gilchrist, John Anderson, Rue McClanahan & K Callan at Back Alley

In the Sweet Bye and Bye

REVIEWED BY LEE MELVILLE

Produced by Laura Zucker for Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; (818) 780-2240. Opened July 6; plays Thurs.-Sat., 8; Sun., 3 & 8; ends Aug. 18.

"That's the last funeral you're goin' to," Hagen tells his wife Jessie as they return home. "Grief takes me over," she says as she puts on a pot of coffee, which caused her to jump in the grave after the casket. "I feel like I'm being left behind," she grieves. She feels there has to be more in the hereafter and she envies those who now know the secret. In this small farming town somewhere north of Portland, Oregon, everyone knows what everybody else is doing. Hagen hasn't worked for three years so they depend upon her mother to give them house and board while Jessie's pill-popping younger sister Neva takes care of bedding Hagen (on Wednesday nights while Jessie is at prayer meeting). Jessie and Hagen's alcoholic son Bill Leland, while en route home from a hospital, narrowly escapes a fiery highway accident and arrives unconscious but uninjured on a stretcher. His mother, thinking him dead, falls upon the body and breaks his arm.

Donald Driver's very funny play, *In the Sweet Bye and Bye*, which world premiered at the Buffalo Studio Arena Theatre in March, 1983, is mostly on the mark. For the version at the Back Alley, Allan Miller took over the directorial reins mid-rehearsal from Driver who reportedly had to return to New York on business. The change in directors may have resulted in a change of direction because by press night the actors were not always sure where to take this comedy which is alternately hilarious, black, farcical and serious. The first few moments are rapid-fire Neil Simon quips, then Driver veers more toward the dark satiric tone of Joe Orton. Nothing wrong with that if the throughline is clear but in this case it isn't.

Rue McClanahan shades Jessie's high-strung hysteria with subtlety and charm which makes the character more credible; this is a woman who knows more than she allows others to see and if she talks to her deceased friend Edna through a dilapidated switchboard it isn't as much a sign of her mental balance as it is a way to maintain her sanity. McClanahan's expertise at frantic comic delivery is beautifully contrasted here by John Anderson's droll manner as Hagen. Not only is he a neat foil for Jessie's antics but the honesty and naturalness which emit from this actor almost make one wonder if he is indeed performing. Rounding out the leading trio of players is K Callan as Neva who holds her own in this zaniness as an unfulfilled woman in love with her sister's husband. Into this basically three-character play arrives Carmel Gibbs, a nurse accompanying Bill Leland home. She has a set of problems all her own and though Rebecca Gilchrist gives the role a good try the combination doesn't really jell. In many respects the character is superfluous as is Lamar Shooler, a local townsperson played by Gene Ross, and Bill Leland, portrayed with restrained vigor by Christopher Murray.

Rich Rose has designed a country kitchen, complete with old-fashioned gas stove and ugly wallpaper; it is less a set than a house which looks lived in. Leslie Sullivant's lighting is so correct it is never noticeable and Armand Coudu's costumes have clever tell-tale touches which say a lot about the characters. Among the funny bits of business is having the dog in the back yard bark every time Neva comes in or leaves (Jerry Sider is sound consultant). Additional performances can clear up any timing difficulties but for *In the Sweet Bye and Bye* to completely fulfill its intent it needs some structural rethinking.