

**THEATRE REVIEWS**



L. Naff, W. Freedman, D. O. Cameron, W. DeAcutis & L. Jordan in 'Peanut'

ED KRUEGER

**Found a Peanut**

BY LEE MELVILLE

Produced by Laura Zucker; Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; (818) 780-2240. Opened June 28; plays Wed.-Sat., 8; Sun., 3 & 8; ends Aug. 10.

"It's the last day of summer; tomorrow it'll be over and we have to go to school." So it gives Mike particular joy to chalk up the last game of Skelly in the backyard of his Brooklyn tenement house on the Sunday before school starts. He'll be playing with the house champs, Scott and ringleader Jay. But then Jay's five-year-old brother Little Earl tells him Jay's father has come to take him to Radio City. "That means the Rockettes, a stage show and a movie," Mike moans. Jay won't be home till after it gets dark and Scott won't want to play now because there is no challenge when he's up against just Mike. Jeffrey Smolowitz, an IGC (intellectually gifted child), offers to play but Mike doesn't want him. Also, Mike has to keep an eye on his little sister and her girlfriend. It's an unhappy end of summer 1962 for Mike until the children find a dying bird which momentarily diverts his disappointment.

While Mike goes up to find a box to bury the bird in, two older neighborhood bullies, brothers Ernie and Shane, arrive on the scene and terrorize Jeff, steal his ball and accuse him of being "a faggot." When Mike returns, Jeff helps him dig a hole to bury the bird and they discover money buried in a Carvel bag. Jeff wants half since he was the one who actually found the old sack. While they argue the bullies return and figure out what Mike is hiding. Mike runs, they chase him; he eludes them until he returns to the backyard where he is betrayed when the brothers catch up, beat him up, pull his pants down and steal the money.

Playwright Donald Margulies may be saying it is a cruel, tough world no matter how old you are but his 90-minute play, *Found a Peanut*, belabors the point and takes twice as long as necessary to make it. It is interesting to have adults playing these children (one can only wonder how actors the correct ages would handle this play) and director Michael Arabian has avoided the cliched mannerisms so often seen when actors play younger (or older) than they are. Instead, we see an essence of the children; the actors, except in one case, become the younger characters without resorting to cutesy actions or vocal deliveries.

They convince as children by holding an object differently than an adult would or walking with a deliberate awkwardness. Best at displaying this is David O. Cameron who took over the role of Mike when original actor Jeffrey Combs had to leave due to a death in his family. Cameron is fully convincing and when at the end he is humiliated in front of his friends a sudden maturity is seen in his face as he then befriends the intellectual Jeff. William DeAcutis walks a thin line by giving Jeff a delicate demeanor without resorting to effeminacy. Being considered an outcast by those his own age causes Jeff to have a certain sympathetic edge but DeAcutis never overdoes the dramatics, even in his devastating scene when his rubber ball is stolen by the toughs. Only Jeffrey Rogers as Scott doesn't believably convey the pubescent age primarily due to his attitude and jerky movements which are more correct for an older teenager or college-age youth.

Lycia Naff as Mike's sister Melody and Winifred Freedman as her girlfriend Joanie are convincing eight-year-olds who want to play games like "Monster" or "Mother" but can't really relate to what turmoil the older boys are going through. Leslie Jordan as Little Earl has the funniest role and he is an expert at clowning; often his actions get a little wearing as would any five-year-old's. All three of the actors playing these younger children avoid obvious choices which could make them appear ridiculous.

As the older Ernie, Ben Mittleman gives the production's finest performance. He is the only cast member to successfully use a Brooklyn accent while his physical demeanor conveys a fully developed man's body which has progressed much quicker than his 14-year-old mind. Though not on stage as much as most characters, every moment of Mittleman's Ernie reeks of danger and power. Kenny D'Aquila as Shane appropriately shows why younger brothers with little initiative often live under the control of their big brother.

Whether it is in Margulies' writing or Arabian's direction, or both, there is a resistance to let the piece flow on its own course, resulting in it being too stagey. The purpose of a ramp from the back door of the building to the yard is never explained and seems more a theatrical device. The first half of the play has endless pauses (kids would not be so tentative in their own backyard) and the pacing doesn't pick up until Ernie's first entrance. Mike's beating isn't believably brutal enough while Ernie is too hesitant in stealing the money; most thugs wouldn't hesitate to grab the money and run.

The Back Alley has provided a first-rate technical production, headed by scenic designer Rich Rose's excellent backyard setting showing a deteriorating lower middle-class housing unit with wire fences which youth gangs have torn apart. Costume designer Barbara Cox has made sure the pants are a little too baggy and the girls' dresses are well worn. Leslie Rose's lighting and Andrew McCarl's sound help achieve proper atmosphere.