

# ON STAGE

BY DICK LOCHTE

## DUET FOR ONE

*Sweet Harmony*

In the past few years, producers Laura Zucker and Allan Miller have presented a remarkable string of successful plays at their Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys, including *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?*, *The Fox*, *A Woman of Independent Means* and, most recently, Tom Kempinski's *Duet for One*, which has now moved to a newer, larger home at the Hollywood Playhouse (1445 N. Las Palmas Blvd.).

Prior to its Back Alley reincarnation—with Linda Kelsey as a concert violinist whose life has been considerably altered by multiple sclerosis and Allan Miller as her seemingly enigmatic psychiatrist—*Duet* had been met with moderate applause in London while opening to silence in New York, despite the casting of Anne Bancroft and Max Von Sydow.

As is the case with most dramatic fictions centering on psychiatry, there is the built-in challenge of how to grab and hold an audience's attention with two hours of conversation. We remember how fascinating psychiatric give-and-take can be in films like *Klute* and *An Unmarried Woman*, but these scenes were only parts of much broader canvases. In *Duet* the psychiatry sessions are all we get, six of them, in which the patient-doctor relationship is introduced, tested and eventually pushed to its limits. Much of it evokes a sense of déjà vu. The temptation is to skip ahead mentally to ponder what twists the author has in store, what ultimate surprises he plans to unveil just before the final curtain. Kempinski doesn't deliver many twists, and his ending, though mildly satisfying, is not the breakthrough we've been hoping for.

It is not hard to imagine why the Broadway production met its fate or why the Back Alley version found an audience. *Duet*'s strongest selling point is not its story but its humanity, and, as talented as Bancroft and Von Sydow may be, they have established such larger-than-life images (Mrs. Robinson and Jesus Christ, among others) that humanity is rarely part of their package these days. Kelsey and Miller, on the other hand, are able to



Kelsey and Miller in *Duet for One*.

convince us that they are the characters they're playing. Their technique is invisible, as it should be.

Kelsey has a preestablished image, too, of course, thanks to several seasons on *Lou Grant*. But she has turned her beset violinist into a young woman not unlike reporter Billie Newman—bright, strong willed but vulnerable, human enough to be wrong. Miller has played such a variety of roles on film that his taciturn shrink is hampered by no preconceptions. Under Ron Satlof's direction, they manage to turn a standard play into a rather special tour de force. In other words, thanks to the acting duet for two, *Duet for One* is worth our attention. ★★½

## DELIRIOUS

*This Is the Life?*

It had to happen, I suppose, only I'd hoped there'd be more time. Thanks to Susan Dietz's and the Delirious Company's production of this drama by J. Bunzel (at the Pilot Theater, 6600 Santa Monica Blvd.), we now have our first MTV-influenced theatrical presentation.

Even before the curtain goes up (figuratively speaking, of course, curtains

being as old hat as network programming), the TV in designers Gerry Hariton's and Vicki Baral's glitzy penthouse-apartment set is tuned to everybody's favorite music channel. Unspooling on opening night (not by happenstance, I assume) was the "We Are the World" video with the who's who of rock 'n' roll singing for Africa's supper and providing a nifty introduction to a play exploring the flip side of '80s-fast-lane sensibilities. No one here is about to do anything for anybody.

The young people passing the night in Bunzel's music-and-coke-filled clambake are too self-absorbed to think about feeding anything but their egos and noses (not necessarily in that order). They are an odd crowd—a tennis pro (Cristen Kauffman), a phone salesman (Eddie Velez), a would-be actor (Dan Gerrity), a hairdresser (Barbara Howard), a bank teller (Peter Frechette), a probably bogus Rastafarian (Lawrence-Hilton Jacobs) and a dreamy drifter (Stephen Nichols). What brings them all together is the heady promise of cocaine and kicks to be provided by their poor-little-rich-boy host (Cyril O'Reilly).

Playwright Bunzel apparently wants us to think of these depressingly lunkheaded youths as our new Lost Generation—confused, barely noticed by their

★★★★★ Outstanding    ★★ Good    ★ Poor  
★★★★★ Excellent    ★★ Fair