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STYLE

Theater

The farce is with us in
the "Bye and Bye." / C-7

Say hi to sage silliness in 'Sweet Bye and Bye'

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*Play successfully
teeters between
farce and pathos*

IN THE SWEET BYE AND BYE, a play by Donald Driver; directed by Allan Miller; scenic design by Rich Rose; lighting by Leslie Sullivant; costumes by Armand Coutu; produced by Laura Zucker at the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 8 p.m. Thu-Sun, 3 p.m. Sun, through Aug. 18. Tickets: \$12-\$14. Information: (818) 780-2240.

By Richard Stayton
Herald staff writer

If Donald Driver isn't Irish, he should be. Consider these lines from his play "In the Sweet Bye and Bye," currently at the Back Alley in Van Nuys.

"Momma had a heart attack," moans a grieving daughter. "She was sitting on the davenport, he told her a joke, she started to laugh — and keeled over."

Death in the midst of laughter is an Irish literary tradition that dates from Jonathan Swift's first modest proposal to Samuel Beckett's latest minimalist piece. However, Driver's serio-comic "Bye and Bye" mixes such dark Irish wit into pure Americana, wryly commenting on a rural small-town family's obsession with death (and, by default, sex). Driver may not be a major playwright, but he's been on the theatrical scene long enough to shamelessly absorb a number of comic traditions that, when coupled with a zany pace — although sometimes anchored by actors' business (more about this later) — send an audience belly-up with laughter.

"I can't help if I feel things," cries Jessie (Rue McClanahan) in the opening scene. "Grief takes me over." But her husband, Hagen (John Anderson), isn't going to permit her to attend any more of the town's funerals, not if at every burial site she dives into the open grave. In fact, the whole town's talking, with even her own mother asking Jessie not to attend her funeral, even though Jessie protests, "Momma, I'm not going to jump on your coffin!"

Her sister Neva (K Callan) also finds this obsessive behavior peculiar, but keeps a lower, more tolerant profile to protect her clandestine affair with Hagen. This isn't as immoral as it sounds, since Jessie found Jesus three years ago and has refused to sleep with Hagen since.

The improbable mixes well with the all-too-plausible in a purely McLuhanesque reality made possible by our impatient television viewing habits. Midway, a scene

will shift tone, but the plot never slips a gear — only the changes. The same treatment could more consistently play out in utter disbelief, but here it's handled adroitly and makes the silliness twice the fun.

The chaotic narrative brings to mind a host of progenitors, from Hart and Kaufman to Sam Shepard. You'll recognize family traits longing to "Tobacco Road" and "You Can't Take It With You." Sex and death and unemployment, an intricate network of small-town relationships, even cancer and greed are lightly lampooned.

Driver's unique style is teamed with a finely tuned ensemble that makes this tale teeter between farce and pathos. John Anderson's deadpan delivery perfectly complements Rue McClanahan's obnoxious fury. One easily believes their marriage as a lifelong truce. Callan manages to keep her character sympathetic despite her adultery, while Gene Ross is the good neighbor down the road who's been driving a tractor through one's crop too many. Rebecca Gilchrist has the most difficult role as a nurse who must casually and somewhat comically discuss mastectomy but her portrayal sidesteps each melodramatic land mine. Even Christopher Murray as the bad son never speaking a line on stage manages to keep his balance.

A program note explains that in "mid-rehearsal" Driver was forced to abandon his directing chores here and return to New York to honor another professional commitment. He was replaced by Back Alley producing director Allan Miller. Normally such midstream shifts invite chaos, but in the case of "Bye and Bye" such a forced marriage actually increases the laughs. Driver's script fractures the tragic and the comic into a jigsaw puzzle of odd delights. Thus the two directors' styles — one more thoughtful, the other more "Hellza poppin'" — create a jarring, unexpected rhythm that encourages our laughs.

However, such co-direction also permits performers to periodically lose their restraint, anxiously relying on arm-waving and sighs and more actors' business than seems appropriate for these rural types. But this is only a minor complaint about an otherwise consummately professional cast.

Rich Rose's farmhouse kitchen is a marvelous period design combining clutter and rural necessities. All is cozily lighted by Leslie Sullivant. If there's a technical complaint, it's with the sound: We never believe there's a live dog barking in the farmyard or cars parking outside.