

'Slab Boys,' played as a farce, dies

SLAB BOYS, a play by John Byrne, directed by Bill Castellino; set by Chris Idoine; costumes by Diana Eden; lighting by Chris Lomaka; sound by Jerry Sider. Presented at the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 8 p.m. Mon-Wed, Sat, 3 p.m. Sun. through Nov. 28. \$12; seniors/students, \$10. Information: (818) 780-2240.

Spanky	Christopher M. Moore
Hector	James LeGros
Phil	Dennis Christopher
Willie	John H. Fields
Jack Hogg	Bob McCracken
Alan Downie	Michael Covert
Sadie	Zelda Rubinstein
Lucile	Catherine Harper

By Richard Staylor
Herald staff writer

British playwright John Byrne has cleverly mixed multiple puns in his title "Slab Boys." There's the literal interpretation: apprentice designers laboriously grinding powders on marble slabs to dye carpets in a grimy Scottish factory. There's the emotional impression: The title could refer to a punk rock group, even though it's 1957. There's a comic reference: This could be about "Animal House" zanies, and indeed, this crew behaves just like wild and crazy guys.

But the key reference has no humor at all: "Slab" also means a piece of meat and a morgue's dead end. Byrne's play is ultimately about youth on the bottom of a class society, making less than "three quid a week," with barely a prayer of escape. The only rebellion for these wage slaves lies in cruel pranks, rock 'n' roll and swearing. But this tragic level is missing from the Back Alley's West Coast premiere of Byrne's London hit. Here, the social satire has been sacrificed for farce, just as Hollywood turned playwright Sidney Kingsley's Depression "Dead End" kids into the "Bowery Boys."

Designer Christopher M. Idoine's set instantly reveals the flaw in the company's interpretation. Where are the marble slabs? Instead of



Slab boys, from left, Alan (Michael Covert), Spanky (Christopher Michael Moore) and Phil (Dennis Christopher) attempt to revive fellow "boy," the hapless victim of their practical jokes, Hector (James LeGros).

bling medieval instruments of torture, these lads crouch over tiny desks that belong in an elementary school. Missing is the crushing weight of industry. This isn't a workroom, it's a playroom where Phil rules the class.

"No hoppers!" Phil says to his fellow slab boys. Phil is secretly an artist, hiding his Elvis Presley

able. There are distant echoes of De Niro's "Mean Streets" Jester in Christopher's portrayal, but with an often incomprehensible Scottish working-class dialect. His goals are intelligent: to portray a creative individual caught in a trap, crazy with the need to escape. But Christopher becomes a sadistic narcissist dominating the stage in all the wrong ways. We're relieved when he exits.

Once Christopher is off, we see what might have been. The remainder of the cast is restrained and realistic, with the exception of John H. Fields as the cursed boss and Catherine Harper as "every slab boy's dream." Fields turns the Dickensian aspects of his character into an embarrassing parody, as does Harper's exaggerated sweater girl. But James LeGros is especially fine as Hector, the vulnerable victim of the slab boys' practical jokes.

Christopher Michael Moore has the thankless task of playing Phil's best friend, yet he reveals a sympathetic core inside his street swagger. When he bends over his slab, Moore seems to be growing from it, already spliced to a life of drudgery.

Bob McCracken's Hogg is Spanky's future, an ambitious ex-slab boy who has "graduated" to designer status. McCracken's stutter and spasmodic gestures painfully reveal how such "progress" twists these working-class heroes.

But the characters blur into a confusion of identities as comic business abounds. Even Zelda ("Pottergeist") Rubinstein's sweet tea lady can't rescue us from the colliding styles and incomprehensible dialects. Director Bill Castellino is faithful to a tradition of farce that includes "The Goon Show" and "Monty Python," unfortunately "Slab Boys" are the sons of the "Dead End" kids, not the Marx Brothers.

key to Byrne's conception, the one slab boy with a way out. But his "Maw" has gone off the deep end again and is back in a psychiatric ward. When Dennis ("Breaking Away") Christopher's Phil asks, "Do you think going off your head's catching?" we have to believe insanity does run in families. Christopher makes Phil a paranoid,