

'Duet' sings a sad and sudsy song

Linda Kelsey on an emotional roller coaster at Back Alley

DUET FOR ONE, a play by Tom Kempinski, directed by Ron Satlof; sets by Christopher M. Joine; lighting by Joseph N. Tawil; costumes by Martha Burke; sound by Jerry Sider; produced by Laura Zucker at the Back Alley Theatre, 1523 1/2 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 8 p.m. Thu-Sat, 3 p.m. Sun, through March 31. Tickets: \$12-\$14. Information: (818) 780-2240.

Stephanie Abrahams Linda Kelsey
Dr. Alfred Feldmann Allan Miller

By Susan King
Herald staff writer

"Duet for One," Tom Kempinski's drama suggested by British cellist Jacqueline DuPre's battle with multiple sclerosis, received the Critics Award for Best Play of the Year in London in 1980, but American critics and audiences haven't been as kind; when "Duet" debuted on Broadway in late 1981 with Anne Bancroft and Max Von Sydow it lasted only 20 performances. A 1983 off-Broadway revival at the Roundabout Theater fared a bit better. It ran

for three months.

At the Back Alley, the production is strong, but the play remains a talky snooze. Kempinski, a former actor, chronicles the struggle of a bright young woman, Stephanie Abrahams (Linda Kelsey), whose career as a concert violinist is cut short when she contracts multiple sclerosis. Since her composer-husband believes she needs help in rebuilding her life, he sends her to a psychiatrist, Dr. Alfred Feldmann (Allan Miller), a quiet man who tends to his plants and listens to classical musical between patients.

At her first visit with Feldmann Abrahams seems to be too happy, coping all too well with her misfortune. She talks incessantly about her plans for the future. But over the next five scenes, Abrahams falls apart as reality dawns on her and she comes to grips with her disease. Her plans to take in pupils and work as her husband's secretary don't work out; she reveals her hatred for her father; she refuses to take her

anti-depressant medicine.

As Abrahams becomes more and more despondent, her behavior toward the benevolent Feldmann becomes increasingly abusive with each session. After she enters into a disastrous affair with a local handyman, Feldmann can't keep his professional distance any longer; he explodes and warns her that she's on the verge of suicide.

The Back Alley delivers as much good acting as possible considering the soapy script. Kelsey, best known to TV audiences as Billie Newman on "Lou Grant," rides the roller coaster of Abrahams' emotions with great ease. Her performance is actually a mite too slick, though she does have some moving moments in Act 2. Miller, saddled with the underwritten role of Feldmann, is quietly effective.

Ron Satlof's direction is undistinguished but serviceable, which is more than can be said for Martha Burke's rather cheesy costumes.

