

■ **An Involved Audience**

A Valley theater invites members of the audience to discuss the environmental issues raised in a play.

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METRO VALLEY

Los Angeles Times

6 Part II/Monday, November 11, 1985/F



BRYAN MOSS / Los Angeles Times

Discussing the play "Ringers" are, from left, toxic-waste specialist Florence Pearson, actress Diana Daves and Sierra Club's Fritz Bernstein.

Play Elicits Dialogue After the Curtain Falls

By ALLAN JALON, Times Staff Writer

Many theatergoers would envy the opportunity that Louis Biderman had last week at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys.

After the evening's play ended and the lights came on, the management asked Biderman to comment on the play and its main topic—hazardous-waste dumping.

"The issue is a very serious one, very important, but the play was totally unrealistic," said Biderman, a Van Nuys resident who was in the audience at a preview last Wednesday night.

"People are like that," countered another playgoer, Debbie Olsen of Granada Hills, referring to the characters on stage. "I know people like that."

The remarks typified the openness and contrasting perceptions of audience members that enlivened the Back Alley's most emphatic effort yet to link a play to the social or political realities it reflects. The play is called "Ringers," and the Back Alley is holding audience forums after every Wednesday performance to explore the environmental issues the play raises. The comments were made at the first of the forums.

In the past, the theater has never held more than one audience forum per production.

Contaminated Bricks

"Ringers," set in Denver, focuses on a mason's dilemma about what he should do with a large number of radioactive bricks he has bought. Denver playwright Frank X. Hogan based his play on the 1979 discovery in his home city of 31 radioactive dump sites. The sites contained radioactive ores and their byproducts that were dumped by the flourishing ore-processing industry the city had in the 1920s. Some of the ore was found in a brickyard.

The play has only one reference to the actual dump-site discoveries, but Hogan says that, in Denver, where the play was first produced a year ago, audience members were aware of its link to the headline-making incidents that inspired it.

Laura Zucker and Allan Miller, the Back Alley's artistic directors, are trying to create a similar connection for their audience, drawn mostly from the San Fernando Valley. On the program's cover is a collage of stories and headlines on news events in



Elizabeth Beale and James Fonseca stayed on for forum at Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys.

the Valley, such as "13 Area Firms Hit With Air-Pollution Penalties," "2 Charged With Illegal Storage of Explosives in Northridge Shop" and "Scores Hurt by Leaking Chemicals."

The Back Alley has invited officials from local environmental agencies and activists from the Sierra Club and other groups to lead audience discussions on hazardous-waste dumping at Wednesday performances through Dec. 18. The play, which has been in previews since Halloween, had its formal opening Saturday night.

The invited experts last Wednesday were Fritz Bernstein, solid-waste chairman of the Sierra

Club's Southern California Regional Conservation Committee, and Florence Pearson, a state waste-management specialist. The two women sat before the audience with Diana Daves, an actress who handles public relations for the Back Alley, between them to field the questions.

Only about 10 of the 80 people who attended the play stayed for the discussion. Asked if the forum was successful, Zucker said: "Yes and no. I wish more people had stayed, but I felt that those who stayed, there were some valuable things expressed. The purpose for the forum is to get people thinking."

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"To tell you the truth, the ground-water problem in the Valley terrifies me," Zucker said, referring to government reports of polluted wells in the area. "I think other people are concerned but no one knows what to do."

A number of those who stayed for the discussion also seemed to share Zucker's worry about local hazardous-waste problems. "It seems that every day I'm reading in the paper about more and more illegal dumping in the Valley," one woman said. "Is the problem getting worse or are we just hearing more about it?"

'Problems Getting Worse'

Before anyone could answer, another woman said, "Santa Monica Bay; boy, some of the problems are getting worse."

Answered Pearson: "I think it's both. I think there is more reporting, but I also think the problem is a big one."

"Why aren't they stopping the manufacturing of toxic wastes?" asked Joanne Fleischer of Northridge.

Pearson said the government is using the threat of monetary penalties to persuade industries to reduce the quantity of hazardous waste they produce. But it is a slow process, she added.

In a telephone interview from Denver, Hogan, 36, who writes feature stories and a weekly column for an alternative paper called Westword, said he wrote the play to explore the personal side of the environmental issue.

"I wanted to show that it's not just something in a headline," Hogan said. "Here in Denver we have a very bad air pollution problem, and the city has instituted a clean-air program, which is a voluntary program designed to get people to not drive one day a week. It's not working. Nobody wants to take the responsibility, nobody wants to take their little part."

In Hogan's play, the mason, Keith Rankowski, buys the bricks at a discount from his brother-in-law, who has not told him they are radioactive. The mason knows something is wrong but he doesn't ask questions, and instead dreams of making a big profit on his

next job. When the truth about the bricks is discovered he is blackballed in the industry.

To prove to colleagues that he is a superb bricklayer and that he is not dumping the bricks, he uses them to build an elaborate house. However, his wife becomes pregnant and moves out, and Rankowski must decide whether to leave also or live in a radioactive house.

Zucker, whose husband, Miller, directed the play, said she had hoped the audience forum would revolve around environmental topics. Some of the comments did. But the discussion also focused on the mechanics of the play, Hogan's first professionally produced effort.

"It seemed to me that the author

was trying to do two things and neither of them worked," said Dr. Elizabeth Beale of Thousand Oaks. "He was trying to deal with some serious issues and he was trying to write some sort of comedy. I didn't think it was funny."

Said Fleischer: "I thought it was funny. And if it weren't funny, it would have been depressing."

"I regard it as a kind of allegory," the Sierra Club's Bernstein said. "Here we have a person who is trying to deal with a moral dilemma and with all the aspects of his personal life, too. I don't think it was a great play, but if you look inside the playwright's mind you can see that he had some pretty important ideas to deliver."