



Rue McClanahan, left, is being restrained by sister K Callan and husband John Anderson in "In the Sweet Bye and Bye."

STAGE REVIEW

THEATRICKS ABOUND IN 'BYE AND BYE'

By SYLVIE DRAKE,
Times Theater Writer

Theater loves nothing better than a well-turned paradox, and the most bewitching thing about Donald Driver's "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys is its deliberate affection for contradiction. Everyone in this mini-tornado of a comedy is a paradox and the quirkiness converts Driver's

straightforward kitchen-sink comedy into a joyous, entertaining play.

There's no denying that "Bye and Bye's" roots are firmly planted in TV sitcom, though not any more or less than, say, Beth Henley's Southern gothics. Much like Henley, Driver (best known for "Your Own Thing") sets up unconventional characters in unpredictable situations and lets 'em rip—noisily and with the sort of rebel spirit that enraptures an audience.

In some nondescript small American town, Hagen and Jessie have been married too long and have settled into semi-separate states of rattled exasperation.

Hagen, an able-bodied middle-aged man (vigorous enough to sustain an ongoing affair with Jessie's widowed sister Neva) has

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given up work on the principle that "Man's greatest contributions have already been made: the wheel and the sneaker." High-strung Jessie is obsessed with the afterlife. Lately, she's taken to jumping into open graves while insisting that she merely "slips" and "falls." As the town's former central (telephone operator), she also talks to the deceased over the disconnected switchboard that is her kitchen centerpiece.

If this all sounds faintly absurd, it is and gets even more so when Hagen's and Jessie's alcoholic son comes home, accompanied by his nurse, from wherever he had been institutionalized. That's when the caterwauling really gets going.

The unfurling of this plot doesn't bear repeating except to tell you that it works in defiance of all odds.

Not only does son, Bill Leland, a point of focus, barely appear and never utter a word, but, breaking other dramaturgical rules, we also have three significant characters who are presences only at the other end of telephone conversations.

As in the best of plays, the degree to which the playwright makes us believe in his incongruities measures the success of the enterprise. Driver not only makes believers of us all, but, with only one lapse into obvious theatricks, makes it a seamless consummation to a satisfying end.

The production's rousing success at the Back Alley has everything to do with splendid casting, acting directing and production values.

Beyond cooling passions and the distance and stagnation that divide Jessie and Hagen, Rue McClanahan and John Anderson make us see the

earlier possibilities of that marriage and the affection that continues to bind them. McClanahan's particular energy and magnetism make Jessie much more poignant than crazy—an important distinction in a performance that could easily err in the direction of excess.

Even more remarkable, perhaps, is K Callan's Neva, a pleasantly glamorous woman who quite persuades us that there is no fundamental contradiction between loving her sister dearly and loving that sister's husband sexually.

As Carmel, the nurse who brings Bill Leland home, but ends up befriending his mama, Rebecca Gilchrist gives a plain Jane performance that grows and grows. Christopher Murray is not much more than a derelict body as Bill Leland and Gene Ross provides pleasantries as a friendly neighbor.

Good set, lighting and costumes by Rich Rose, Leslie Sullivant and

Armand Coutu, respectively, complement the production. Driver started to stage it himself, surrendering the directorial reins to Allan Miller when other commitments pressed. Between them they have done a brisk and balanced job of restraining most of the shtick and heightening the humanism.

Two complaints: the tape-re-

corded dog offstage sounds phony (is he really necessary?) and the deception that concludes Act I, making Jessie believe that Bill Leland has died, is a cheap trick in a comedy that otherwise neatly avoids them. Laura Zucker produced.

Performances at 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys run Thursdays through Sundays at 8 p.m., with matinees Sundays at 3 p.m., until Aug. 18 (818-780-2240).