

# CALENDAR

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## STAGEREVIEW

### A GRIPPING DUEL FOR TWO IN 'DUET FOR ONE'

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**D**uet for One" at the Back Alley Theatre is a curiously satisfying evening. It doesn't quite deliver as a story, but, in a way, one appreciates that. It's part of the play's honesty toward some very painful material. What counts is the feeling of having lived two hours with two remarkable people.

Knowing that Tom Kempinski's play was inspired by cellist Jacqueline du Pre's fight against multiple sclerosis, I expected that its two characters would represent Du Pre and her conductor/pianist husband, Daniel Barenboim. In fact, Kempinski's characters are a stricken musician and her psychiatrist, and there's not necessarily any relationship to the Du Pre case.

That frees him of the need to make his violinist an indomitable young woman who will find a way to make music in spite of her handicap, etc., etc. This is not a Movie of the Week or a talk show, although the wheelchair-bound violinist (Linda Kelsey) rolls into psychiatrist Allan Miller's office for her first visit as if it were. Hey, I can cope!

In fact, the climax of the play is the heroine's recognition that some conditions can't be conquered by the human will, even as strong a will as hers. She is truly in this wheelchair forever. Truly stuck. Some victory, for \$150 an hour. Thanks a lot, doc. No wonder your patients commit suicide.

Where one goes from there is beyond "Duet for One" to solve, for which we respect it. This is a play about a person being led lovingly past her own defenses, to a point where she can look at the truth and truly begin to cope. And the process is, perhaps, a little pat. "Duet for One" treats the rite of Freudian catharsis more uncritically than may be called for.

But the Back Alley production, staged by Ron Satlof, takes care of a good many objections to that. Miller plays the psychiatrist as a man not free of personal anxieties himself. He truly doesn't like to look his patients square in the eye,



and when Kelsey rolls too close to his zone of comfort, he shies back.

Without question, this is a good and concerned healer of souls. Just how concerned is made clear in a late, startling soliloquy when he drops his non-directive approach and tells Kelsey exactly where he stands on her "right" to commit suicide.

But there is a power struggle of sorts going on in this room, and he is not above certain dirty tricks (particularly his use of silence) to win it. It is all for the good of the patient, of course. But one can see this play and decide that this kind of psychiatry has more hostility in it than its practitioners may want to admit.

Miller brings exceptional reality to a part that could have been smug and stodgy. But the showier role is Kelsey's, and she plays it brilliantly—even daring to take the risk

Allan Miller portrays a psychiatrist, Linda Kelsey plays his patient in Tom Kempinski's "Duet for One" at the Back Alley.

that we'll find her character tire-some in her need perpetually to be "on."

Again, this works to the advantage of the characterization, leading us to credit the violinist as a real, contrary person. Moreover, a person in deeper trouble than we could face. Watching her jabber away, animated as all get-out (the disease is only starting to control her limbs), one feels how intense her despair must be, to force her to pantomime health so vividly.

The doctor must be right. The false, bright manner must be pierced. The fascination is to see how he'll do it, for she is a resourceful (and funny) opponent, who has probably read a few books about psychiatry herself.

Round by round she weakens. Martha Burke's costumes indicating her day-to-day mood as the treatment proceeds. The catharsis at the end of the first act is shattering; we expect more depth in the second act, and don't find it.

But for all the play's unsatisfactory qualities, it engenders a true concern for its characters—and an admiration for the choices that director Satlof and his actors have made. "Duet for One" is definitely a piece for two players, and the counterpoint is exciting.

Christopher Idoine's well-appointed set complements the play's values. It plays at 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, with Sunday matinees at 3, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. (818) 780-2240.