

INSPIRES AS BEST AND BIGGEST ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE

WEEKLY

ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY

Theater

NEW REVIEWS

IN THE SWEET BYE AND BYE In a theater year as dismal as this one, a play that actually makes an audience laugh out loud wins points, especially if the humor isn't tasteless, exploitative, derivative or vacuous. Donald Driver's black comedy about rural Americans who confront the great ontological questions of life between prayer meetings and infidelities is ambitious, original and well-crafted as well as entertaining. Director Allan Miller, who picked up the task when Driver was unable, for scheduling reasons, to finish what he began, has coaxed some superb moments from generally fine actors, including Rue McClanahan, John Anderson and K. Callan. Though often funny, the play is a serious look at ordinary people, at families, unfulfilled dreams, and mortality. Jesus-loving Jessie (McClanahan) talks on a disconnected switchboard to her dead friend Edna and has a habit of flinging herself into the open grave of anyone in town who happens to die. Unemployed husband Hagen (Anderson), he of the "shit-kicker charm," is having a Wednesdays-only affair with Jessie's more stylish sister Neva (Callan), who has gone through three husbands and more than a few wide-brimmed straw hats. There are some holes in the script, and the director and his cast might not have rushed through the sadder notes of the generally comic first scenes, but it's summer, the acting is fine and the laughs are well-earned. Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 & 8 p.m.; thru Aug. 18. Call (818) 780-2240. (Michael Lassell)