

'Ringers' uncovers the human losses of toxic waste

By COLLEEN CASON
News Chronicle

"Ringers," playing at the Back Alley in Van Nuys, is a play with a slight, but infinitely forgivable identity problem. As such, it is probably more important as a modern-day parable than as a play. And as theater, "Ringers" is good television.

But whatever moniker you wish to hang on this gray comedy about the toxic waste deluge that faces us now and in the years ahead, there is no doubt about the play's sincerity or the importance of the issue it addresses.

IN REVIEW

Denver playwright Frank X. Hogan's script presents an ingenious, airtight metaphor for the complex issues of toxic waste. It details dramatically how greed and apathy conspire to make this problem easier to sweep under the carpet than confront.

Rank, a mason, played wistfully, but not always forcefully enough by Michael Cavanaugh, buys hundreds of thousands of bricks at a cut-rate price. Because of the savings he is able to bid the job for thousands less than competitors. But Rank soon discovers the bricks were discounted — or "ringers" — because they had been contaminated by radiation. He loses the job and can't afford to have the bricks disposed of at a toxic waste dump. His greedy



From left, Michael Cavanaugh and John M. Jackson in "Ringers" at The Back Alley in Van Nuys.

brother-in-law, a contractor, is urging him to bury the bricks. But Rank refuses, citing the likelihood the "hot" bricks eventually will poison the water table.

Rank hits upon what seems to him to be a perfect solution; he opts to build his house out of the bricks as a monument to the problem most choose to ignore. Once construction is finished, he has ambitious plans to alert the

media.

Naturally, there is a hitch. Rank and his wife, Vickie, played delightfully by Gretchen Corbett, are expecting their first child after years of trying. Her doctor has urged her to move out before her baby has "flippers instead of limbs."

The very real, very loving relationship between Rank and Vickie shows the way the seemingly impersonal problem

of toxic wastes touches the lives of individuals. It's clear that both feel they are doing the right thing — she, by leaving to have a healthy baby; he, by staying to build a reminder to the poisons which can harm their child in the years ahead.

The problem is Hogan has boxed himself in plotwise, and the second act is nothing more than a reiteration of the problems of the first. To

compensate, he adds funny, but television-like touches: an apparent murder; and Vickie, dressing up in an absurd outfit to help lay the bricks. Nothing more than amusing distractions.

Hogan's forte clearly is characterization. Showing marvelous economy, he has used only four characters to show the prevailing attitudes toward toxic waste. Rank, who believes the problem must be confronted now, whatever the cost. Vickie, whose answer is to move as far away as possible to protect her family. Hodcarrier Gerry, played by John M. Jackson, who is apathetic to the problem and cares only about surviving. And, brother-in-law Griffin, a fast operator whose concern is the short-term profit, not long-term safety.

The economy Hogan showed in characterization did not extend to dialogue. Although the main characters are bricklayers, who are known to curse a word or two, too much of the constant swearing in the play is gratuitous. It's all right to call a spade a spade, but not a "blank" shovel.

The Back Alley made a sound decision staging "Ringers." The play, with its one set and its important, well-stated message is ideal for the 80-seat house.

"Ringers" runs at 8 p.m. Wednesdays through Sundays until Dec. 22. There is a 3 p.m. Sunday matinee. Wednesday performances will be followed by discussions of the toxic waste issue headed by experts. Tickets range from \$12 to \$14. The theater is located at 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. For ticket information, call (818) 780-2240.



A live 'Ringers' V15

Politics and theater often make less than lively bedfellows. But in the case of "Ringers" now on the boards at The Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys, the action is "hot," as in radioactive.