

Daily News July 9, 1985

# 'Sweet Bye and Bye' rings true when it comes to portraying life

By Jay Reiner  
Daily News Theater Critic

Donald Driver's "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" is a beautiful, unsentimental comedy filled with enough laughs, surprises and wry insights into human nature to make your heart turn a dozen somersaults.

The play revolves around Hagen and Jessie (John Anderson and Rue McClanahan), a long-married couple living none-too-happily together in a small Oregon town. Hagen, a sawmill worker, has been unemployed for three years and is thinking of moving to Canada. He also has been sleeping with his sister-in-law, Neva (K Callan), every Wednesday night while Jessie goes to her prayer meetings.

As for Jessie, she feels life has passed her by, which helps explain her mammoth collection of exotic travel brochures and her dream of a better life to come in the sweet bye and bye.

But before she can get there, she has to make it through this life, and apparently it isn't that easy for her. When we first meet Jessie, she's just returned from a funeral where she's taken her usual leap into the open grave of a recently departed friend. Another strange thing: Jessie has an old telephone parlor (she's taken her to talk to whenever she feels the need — on, party Jessie!) to be as dead as the

Other characters are Carmel (Rebecca Gilchrist), an alcoholic nurse who has had a mastectomy; Bill Leland (Christopher Murray), Hagen and Jessie's adopted son who may or may not have a metal plate in his head and who is also an alcoholic and speaks not a line of dialogue all evening long; and Lamar Shooler (Gene Ross), a friend of the family. Finally, there's Jessie's mother and a busybody named Myrtle, two characters who don't materialize in the flesh but have plenty to say about everything that happens.

What happens to these wonderful characters is simply life. They argue, they gossip, they keep secrets, they lie — and they also find time to tell the truth about themselves and, in their own ways, love each other. The play has some of the truest, funniest dialogue you'll ever hear, and a few of the scenes will reduce you to laughter and tears at the same time.

The actors, under Allan Miller's brisk direction, are so well-suited to their roles it's a pleasure to watch them work. There isn't a false note struck all evening long, and McClanahan, Anderson and Callan offer three of the finest portrayals in memory, recent or otherwise. This is the sort of production that restores one's faith in the theater. "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" is playing at the Back Alley Theater, 16231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. Performances are Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m., Sunday at 3 and 8 p.m., reservations, call (818) 780-2240. Tickets are \$12 to \$14. For

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

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Herald Examiner  
Tuesday  
July 30, 1985

Play successfully  
teeters between  
farce and pathos

Say hi to sage silliness  
in 'Sweet Bye and Bye'

theater  
NEW REVIEWS

L.A. WEEKLY  
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, 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.

STAGEREVIEWS  
THEATRICKS  
ABOUT IN  
'BYE AND BYE'

By SYLVIE DRAKE,  
Times Theater Writer

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 theatrics, 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.

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