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STAGEREVIEW

MUDDLED LOGIC AND HOT BRICKS IN 'RINGERS'

By DAN SULLIVAN,
Times Theater Critic

There was a tentative quality to the applause after "Ringers" the other night at the Back Alley Theatre, suggesting that the audience approved playwright Frank X. Hogan's general intention but had trouble buying his story. I felt the same resistance.

The title comes from horseshoes, which Hogan's blue-collar protagonists play as a recess from work. One is a bricklayer (Michael Cavanaugh), the other a hod carrier (John M. Jackson), and they seem to be elaborating an ordinary house into some kind of eccentric red-brick monument, almost a mausoleum.

A Southern Californian is reminded of the Watts Towers, and one of Hogan's sub-themes (we get it from Rich Rose's set) is the blunt poetry of brick and the artistry of the men who work with it. But his play is chiefly a study in integrity. The home in question belongs to the bricklayer, and he is turning it into a sculpture to make a point.

The bricks aren't ordinary. They're radioactive. (As could actually happen in Denver, where Madame Curie once had a laboratory; we get this over the radio at the top of the show.) The bricklayer didn't know they were hot when he bought them. He does now, and he's not going to dump them on

someone else, the way they were dumped on him.

He'll build his monument, call in the TV stations and then . . . watch out, boy. In fact we're not very clear what, exactly, he thinks will happen after that. But the problem will be in everybody's lap, and the publicity won't benefit his shady contractor brother-in-law (Will Nye), who got him into all this. Meanwhile, he's got a job to do here. A good workman doesn't walk away from the site!

Fine. But playwright Hogan hasn't built his story with anywhere near the logic that his hero applies to laying bricks. It's never clear, for example, if our mason sees the radioactive bricks as much of a health hazard at all. On the one hand, he refuses to bury the "hot" bricks. On the other hand, he doesn't seem to mind putting his neighbors, best buddy and wife (Gretchen Corbett) in proximity to them.

If the bricks aren't that much of a threat, in his mind, isn't his going on TV an act of hypocrisy? If they are a threat, isn't he putting people's lives in danger, and won't that come out on TV? The character doesn't have to be aware of how problematic his integrity is, but playwright Hogan should be.

Logic, however, is not his strong suit. It's the kind of a play where anything goes, particularly when a laugh is at stake. Nye as the

skunky brother-in-law gets bopped over the head and buried in a sandpit by Jackson as the best buddy (who seems to change about halfway through the play into Lennie from "Of Mice and Men," a comical Lennie). But, don't worry, it was just a flesh wound.

The business of whether Corbett as the wife should get out of the house now that she's pregnant gets folded into the shtick of Corbett giving away all their home appliances. Later Corbett straps on an aluminum-foil breastplate and starts work as her husband's "hobby." This is "I Love Lucy," except that on Lucy they always prepared the gag.

"Ringers" could have been a modest, touching comedy about a bricklayer who had to let his "hobby" go. As an issues play, it's confused and arbitrary. This poses real problems for Allan Miller's company, particularly Corbett as the vacillating wife. Still, they tie into it, with Cavanaugh crunching little chunks of hot brick to prove what a tough guy he is, and Jackson brushing his teeth with a spritz from a coiled hose. If we don't believe half of what goes in "Ringers," at least we recognize the site.

'RINGERS'

Frank X. Hogan's play, at the Back Alley Theatre. Director Allan Miller. Producer Laura Zucker. Scenic design Rich Rose. Lighting design Craig E. Lathrop. Costume design Hilary Sloane. Sound design Jerry Sider. With Michael Cavanaugh, Gretchen Corbett, John M. Jackson, Will Nye. Plays Wednesdays-Sundays at 8 p.m., with 3 p.m. Sunday matinees. Closes Dec. 22. Tickets \$12-\$14. 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. (818) 780-2240.

Ringers



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