

REVIEW

'Sweet Bye and Bye' tests family strength

By FRANCES BAUM NICHOLSON

There is a line about a third of the way through Donald Driver's play "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" which sums up this original, homey comedy's more serious message.

A wildly emotional woman, faced with concern about her relationship with various family members, calmly assures that it has all been worked out long ago. "Families do that."

This family unit, in all the crazy variations made possible by small-town life, forms an attractive base for the Back Alley Theatre's production of Driver's play, which just opened in Van Nuys. Here, good acting, good direction, a wonderfully perfect set and a funny, warm script make for a play both slap-the-knee humorous and empirically true.

Rue McClanahan is Jessie, a woman so afraid of death's possibilities that she has become locally famous for both her faith and her wild scenes at anyone's funeral. Emotional at a moment's notice, and painfully insecure, she admits to a feeling of existence brought only by caring for her aged mother and her somewhat estranged husband.

STAGE

One laughs not at her, but with her and her family, as they cope with her rather peculiar outlook on life.

John Anderson supplies Jessie's calm, mildly philandering, out-of-work husband, Hagen. K. Callan manages an interesting mixture as the worldly wise sister, bucking up Jessie while fighting urges and neuroses of her own. Rebecca Gilchrist, as a county nurse aiding the convalescence of Jessie and Hagen's son, shows the solidity underneath by finding Jessie's house a home and a haven.

A wily script makes one just as familiar with characters met only over the telephone, especially Jessie's mother, and the vicious town gossip. The result is a charming evening. "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" runs Thursday through Sunday until Aug. 18. Tickets range from \$10 to \$14, depending on the day. For information, call (818) 780-2240. The theater is located at 15231 Burbank Blvd., in Van Nuys.



From left, Rebecca Gilchrist, John Anderson, Rue McClanahan and K. Callan