

Legit Review

In The Sweet Bye And Bye

(Back Alley Theater; \$14 top)

The folks who populate Donald Driver's "In The Sweet Bye And Bye," now playing at Back Alley Theater, are a little more than eccentric without being totally nuts.

In other words, they're just another American family who choose to live their lives the way they want to, minding everyone in town's business but furious when somebody minds theirs.

Jessie, excellently drawn by Rue McClanahan, is a hearse chaser and performs at her optimum at funerals. When play opens, she's just thrown herself into the grave with the casket, apparently trying to get to the hereafter before her time.

Jessie's hubby, Hagen, who hasn't worked for a number of years but still has "feelers" out for a job, is played well by John Anderson. Hagen putters and plays the violin and is not above playing a little on the side on Jessie's prayer meeting night with his spinster sister-in-law Neva, wonderfully portrayed by K Callan.

Gene Ross etches a family friend who's called upon only when family needs something. Jessie and Hagen have this alcoholic son they didn't do such a good job raising and is the apple of grandma's eye — so much so, she's changed her will to give him everything.

Son, essayed by Christopher Murray, is in town with a reformed alcoholic nurse, nicely played by Rebecca Gilchrist, who's willing to stay with the family while son, who's been in an accident while drunk, recovers enough to go it on his own.

In small-town gossip and lifestyle, characters' eccentricities are unmasked, their foibles brought out

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into the open and analyzed and destroyed.

Jessie even gives up talking to the dead on the old telephone switchboard she used when she was "central," before direct dialing came in. Hagen agrees to go back to work at the mill — but just for a while.

All this because the matriarch, who never appears on stage but has been supporting all of them, dies and threatens to cut them all (except son) off.

Driver has a lot of fun with his

characters, and they consequently provide a lot of fun for the audience. Driver started staging his own work but left during rehearsal for a production of one of his other plays. Allan Miller took over the reins, and together they make a good directorial team — at least on this effort.

Rich Rose's homey set is bright and cheery, Leslie Sullivant's lighting ditto. Arman Coutu's costumes are middle-class simple.

"In The Sweet Bye And Bye" is not a great show, but it's one of those comedies that, before tv, would have had a season-and-a-half run on Broadway but now must go to regional theater to draw any attention at all. It's legit situation comedy at its best that, in the minds of producers responsible for big investments, should be on tv. *Edwa.*