

Scribblings of the Stars

Head of theater never draws the line in seeking doodles for benefit

By JANICE ARKATOV

Alan Miller has become a doodle messiah. Sure, he still finds time to run Van Nuys' Back Alley Theatre, direct many of its plays and maintain an acting career. But what really gets his blood pumping these days is doodles. Celebrity doodles. "There's *nobody* I won't approach," Miller said. "I'm absolutely shameless."

The result of that fervor is the Back Alley's fifth annual Doodle Auction, taking place this afternoon at a private home in Sherman Oaks. The lawn party and auction has become the theater's most successful fund-raiser, with tickets going for \$50. Miller and wife Laura Zucker, who helps run the Back Alley, got the idea from a smaller-scale Bay Area theater event that they attended several years ago. But for a long time, they had difficulty persuading their board of directors to try it out.

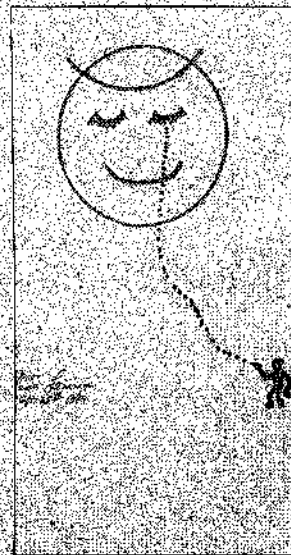
"They kept saying, 'Doodles?'"



Comedy playwright Neil Simon took a pensieve approach to his sketch.



Anne Tyler also gave a copy of her Pulitzer Prize-winning book.



Theater hopes Jack Lemmon's drawing will have 'Mass Appeal.'

Costly Substitutes for Replacing Love of a Human Being

By JANICE ARKATOV

Things aren't going too well for Luton and Patina Mears. Their grown daughter has moved home to the family trailer and is on her way to establishing a *bad* reputation. You see, Patina is submerged in religion. And Luton is into his pet turtles, which he frequently brings inside to watch "Bonanza" with him. He used to have dogs until Patina "accidentally" poisoned them. Now she's on a campaign to set the turtles free.

That's the sorry situation in Boron, Calif., in Thomas Streich's "Neon Psalms," opening this weekend at Theatre West in Studio City.

"The premise I wanted to explore was: Is there a substitute for the love of another human being?" said Streich, a Santa Barbara playwright. "Can pets, can memories, can religion—can *any* of those things—serve as a substitute? And if they

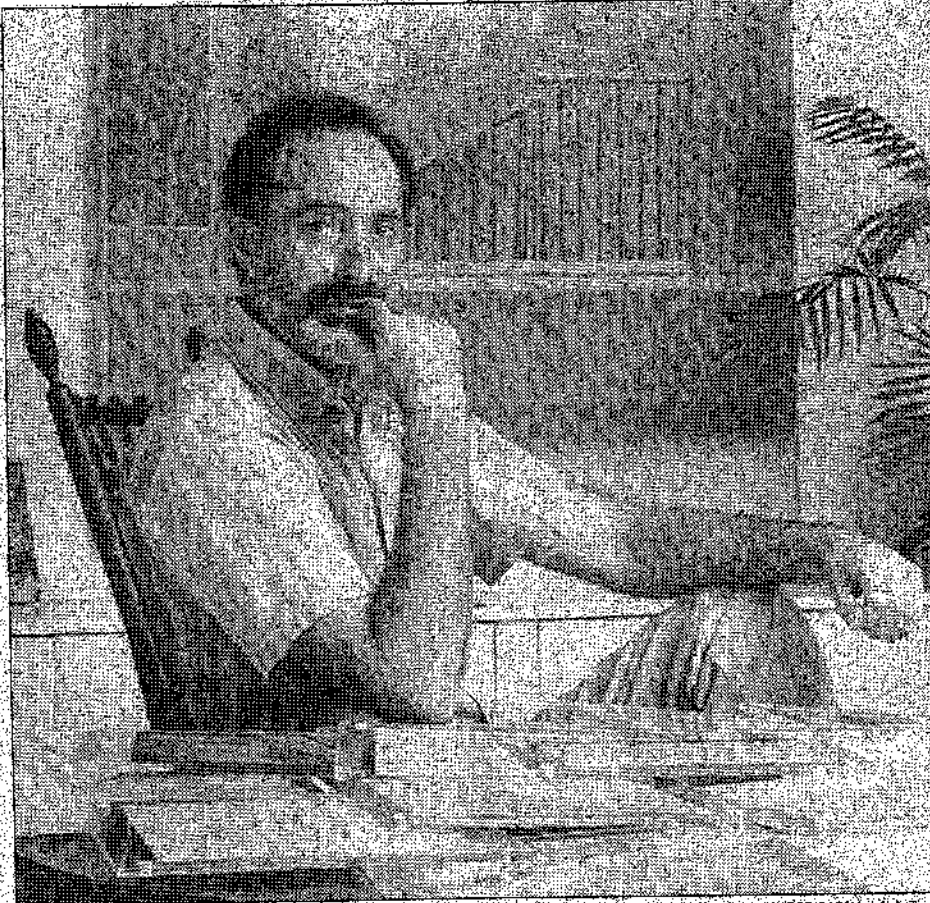
Last year more than \$35,000 was raised from the auction, with a \$30,000 gross going to the nonprofit theater. Guests (attendance usually fluctuates from 175 to 250 people) can stroll on a shaded lawn, listen to chamber music, nibble on hors d'oeuvres and enjoy a sip from the open bar while checking out the art gallery. From 50 doodles the first year, Miller has upped his booty to more than 175—all signed, plexi-glass-framed original works.

Walter Matthau and Paul Newman ("People I know personally to some degree") were early recruits. So was Gregory Peck, with whom Miller had worked on the film "MacArthur." He knew Arthur Miller's sister Joan Copeland and used that as his entree to the playwright. "I'd also worked with Olympia Dukakis. We both taught at the same university; we both ran small theaters. So when Michael Dukakis was running last year, I sent him a letter stressing I was a friend of his cousin's."

Dukakis' reply doodle was a drawing of the White House, captioned: "Not a bad place to live." A bidder, anticipating a Democratic win in November, paid \$2,200, the auction's all-time highest price. The year before, then-Vice President George Bush had sent in a doodle. "The person who bought it was hoping he'd be running for President in '88," Miller said. "He got it for a very modest price." The second-highest price, \$2,000, was for a John Huston drawing, done just before he died.

"This year, we have a gorgeous sketch by Anne Tyler," Miller added. "She also signed the book, 'Breathing Lessons' that she won the Pulitzer Prize for. We also have some historical autographs—like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry Miller."

Other literary doodlers who will be represented include Edward Albee, Saul Bellow, Athol Fugard, John Le Carre, Joyce Carol Oates, Neil Simon, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Garry Trudeau, Leon Uris,



Back Alley Theatre's Alan Miller, with some of the framed doodles to be offered at the benefit, says: "I don't want to give any of these up for auction, but I have to."

Gore Vidal, Kurt Vonnegut and Wendy Wasserstein.

Others represented in the collection include Vladimir Ashkenazy, Lauren Bacall, Jeff Bridges, Carol Burnett, Bob Dylan, Peter Falk, Jodie Foster, Katharine Hepburn, David Hoekney, Ron Howard, Jack Lemmon, John Lithgow, Jay Leno, Steve Martin, Bill Murray, LeRoy Neiman, Jack Nicholson, Oscar Peterson, Tom Selleck, Brooke Shields, James Stewart, Meryl

Streep, Barbra Streisand and Robin Williams. Sports are well-represented, too, with tennis player Chris Evert, boxers Marvin Hagler and Sugar Ray Leonard, and Olympians Carl Lewis and Greg Louganis.

"I don't want to give any of these up for auction, but I have to," Miller said, sighing. "Sometimes I do bid on them. Last year, we ended up with Bob Hoskins' and the year before that we got a devastating self-portrait."

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art used as substitutes, what is the price exacted?"

In this case, it's a high one.

During the Vietnam War, Patina had persuaded their only son to enlist in the Army, saying his father wouldn't respect him if he didn't serve his country. "She didn't want him killed," Strellich noted, "but that was the result." Now she turns on her daughter, probably driving her away for good. "She tells Luton, 'He keeps taking things away from us, till all we have is Him.' But what she's really doing is stripping things away so that—even by default—he'll pay some attention to her."



Thomas Strellich

Strellich, 36, who supervised the play's staging at San Francisco's Magic Theatre in 1985 and New York City's American Place in 1987, has since rewritten its ending, which he described as "very bleak, a stalemate: the battle's over and no one's a winner." In the new ending, Patina has a physical breakdown. "I wanted a feeling that the last thing she could take away from Luton was herself and that when she did, he finally comes to her."

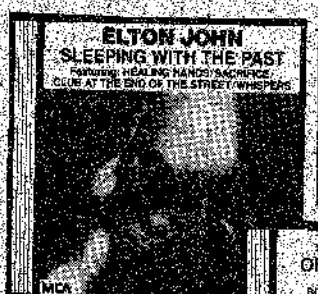
"It's very much a playwright's conceit to have it be dark and mean," he added. "But I wanted a sense of resolution, a sense of conclusion. I always think, 'If I was sitting in the audience, would I be satisfied? Would I feel good about that?'"

Strellich, whose last play, "Dog Logic" (about a nonconformist pet cemetery owner doing battle with land developers), played at South Coast Repertory in 1988, says that characters, rather than plot, are often his motivation.

"Psalms" also benefitted from some real-life observations: When Strellich was a graduate student at Cal Poly San Luis

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crisp, gigantic crepe rolled around potatoes flavored with turmeric and mustard, a ranking contender for a vegetarian street-food hit on the order of the hamburger. If you're really curious, you could order a slightly spicy pilaf called *uppama*, or a combination dish consisting of a rather moist and buttery rice pilaf, studded with cashews and a simple, mildly spiced stew of tomatoes and eggplant. This last item is called "*pongal and gotsu*," but don't ask me which is the *pongal* and which is the *gotsu*.

Paru's has some combination plates sporting these items in various combinations. There's also a *thai* combo plate, which is two

Vegetarians and other health-food people should be demanding more from their restaurants than approved ingredients and an atmosphere of self-congratulation. Paru's shows one way to glamorize those healthful grains.

Recommended dishes: cutlets, \$2.75; *attappam*, \$5.75; *masala dosa*, \$4.95; nuts cake, \$2.

Paru's, 9545 Reseda Blvd., No. 18, Northridge. (818) 349-3546. Open for lunch and dinner 11:30 a.m. to 9 p.m. Wednesdays through Mondays; brunch served Saturdays and Sundays. No alcoholic beverages. Parking lot MasterCard and Visa accepted. Dinner for two, food only \$16 to \$27.

Doodles

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trait by Joan Collins.

"Some of them are really telling. Arnold Palmer did a golf ball coming out to eat him. A year ago, Arthur Miller sent two peanut-shaped figures facing each other with the title 'Gossip.' This year, Norman Mailer did a self-portrait and on top of it he put 'Thoughtful Drunk.'"

Pleased though he is with his lineup, Miller never resists the opportunity to angle for more doo-

dles. Whenever we're invited places as representatives of the theater, I carry a little doodle kit with me which has clippings of past years—and pieces of blank paper. As soon as a friend of mine's in a movie, I say, "Who's in it besides you? Will you give them a packet for me?" Recently, "I went in to read for Mike Nichols for his latest film and before I did the reading, I asked him for a doodle."

The result? Miller chuckled. "I didn't get the part—but I got the doodle."

For ticket information, call the Back Alley at (818) 780-2240.

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