



PENNI GLADSTONE

Winifred Freedman, Lycia Naff, Leslie Jordan, David O. Cameron, from left, in "Found a Peanut."

Tuesday, July 1, 1986

Los Angeles Times

STAGEREVIEW

'FOUND A PEANUT' AS CHILD'S PLAY

By SYLVIE DRAKE, Times Theater Writer

It takes a few minutes to decide what Donald Margulies' "Found a Peanut" at the Back Alley is trying to tell us, largely because of the conceit his play uses.

We are looking at adult actors playing children who take their cues from the adult world around them and let it infect their own.

It's the old microcosm. Lesson? You can get burned. Quickly.

Margulies' play is diffuse, much like the wandering attention of a child. It's played in increments—scenes within scenes that ultimately weave into a whole. A collection of kids are spending their last afternoon before summer ends and school begins in the cement-and-cyclone-fence backyard of their run-down apartment house.

Mike (11, played by David O. Cameron) is drawing a game on the cement; his timid buddy, Jeffrey (William DeAcutis, also playing 11) hangs around. Mike's 8-year-old sister (Lycia Naff) comes moping through. She's lost her keys. Tomorrow she becomes

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a latch-key kid for the first time. How do you do that without keys? At 8, it's a terrible problem.

Her fat friend, Joanie (also 8 and astutely performed by Winifred Freedman) comes over to play, and little Earl (a super job by Leslie Jordan pretending to be 5), the kid brother of another of Mike's friends, brings over his plastic prehistoric animals. He can play "Monster" with the girls.

Nothing much happens. Scott (Jeffrey Rogers, rather too self-assured for 12) comes over and gets mad because Earl's big brother, Jay, has gone to Radio City to the movies with his Dad. That means the afternoon game is off, which also annoys Mike. Jeffrey offers to play, but who wants nerdy Jeffrey? And Scott is extra angry because Ernie (Ben Mittleman) and Shane (Kenny d'Aquila), the neighborhood toughs, are looking for Jay and Jay's not there. That's scary.

Thus, a world is created. Like the adult one it mimics, it has its hierarchies, equations, chemistries, winners and losers.

Gradually, the plot thickens. The discovery of a dead bird leads to found money, which alters relationships. Whose money is it? Whose money should it be? What happens next looks an awful lot like what happens to so-called grown-ups when they fight over dollars. First comes treason and the betrayal of friends, then violence (physical and psychological), then renewal and the death of innocence.

The bird is buried (an obvious symbol). The ritual tossing of dirt into the grave bonds Mike and Jeffrey who've just been put through their first rite of passage by Ernie and Shane and, worse, by Scott. Summer is over. Tomorrow is school. Tomorrow is Life.

"Found a Peanut" (the title is taken from the children's song) is not especially profound, but a bit of a curio that holds our attention largely thanks to its unusual conceit. It is played in one 90-minute shot by actors who all relish the touch of exhibitionism it takes to

portray children. They do it very well, too, though the older the boys are, the greater the trouble they have persuading us of their youth. (Shane is supposed to be only 12, but looks and acts every bit of 14, which is, in fact, Ernie's age).

Like "Andrea's Got Two Boy-friends" at the Eagle Theatre, in which actors play retarded adults who behave like children, "Peanut" is special material, more distinguished by its form than by its content.

In this regard, the play has found the right director in Michael Arabian, himself a bit of a specialist. He recently directed the wordless "Request Concert" at the Cast Theatre and keeps things moving almost unself-consciously here.

He's greatly aided by Rich Rose's stark, depressing set, less so by Leslie Rose's lighting, which is not always sure how to convey a sense of impending storm. Costume designer Barbara Cox might have considered more short pants for the boys to help with the age gap, but the girls' clothes are perfection.

Laura Zucker produced. Performances at 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys run Wednesdays through Sundays, 8 p.m., with Sunday matinees at 3 p.m. (818-780-2240).

FOUND A PEANUT (Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 818-780-2240). Michael Arabian directs a new drama by Donald Margulies about childhood, with adult actors portraying children. Wed.-Sun., 8 p.m.; mat., Sun., 3 p.m. Post-performance discussions Wed. Ends Aug. 10.

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Friday, July 11, 1986

WEEKEND GUIDE

Stage: Child's Play

Michael Arabian directs a fine cast of adult actors who portray children in Donald Margulies' drama exploring childhood "Found a Peanut" at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys.

Stage: Food for Thought

"Found a Peanut," Donald Margulies' thoughtful exploration of childhood, performed by a fine cast of adults playing children, has extended its run at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys through Sept. 21. A special half-price rate is offered to young people between the ages of 10 to 18, accompanied by an adult.

At the Beverly Hills Playhouse on Sunday afternoons, John Young gives a sensitive performance as a lonely man seeking solace in food in the Camelot Artists' Production of Michael Elkin's drama, "Fat Chance."

Compiled by Calendar writers. Fri. 8-1-86