

ENTERTAINMENT



Theatre Talk

By Ruth E. Maier

First off, congratulations to the Hidden Hills Players whose production of "Ernest In Love" has been extended to mid-September (including Labor Day weekend!) All performances are sell-outs in the tiny playhouse hidden away in Hidden Hills, so Sunday evening performances have also been added.

"Ernest In Love" is the musicalized version of Oscar Wilde's classic, "The Importance Of Being Ernest." Veddy British, sure escape, and an enjoyable evening. The score is light and whimsical; the cast delivers; and the audiences go away happy. The box office numbers are either 716-6600 or 348-6263.

Quite the opposite in theme and social conditions is the production of "Found A Peanut" at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys. The very realistic and troubled world of the young during the 1960's is the setting for the play. Neighborhood bullies, the loneliness of latchkey children, and the immediate read of school re-opening the following day are the focus of playwright Donald Margulie's writing.



(Clockwise from top) David Crissman, James Sullivan, Suzanna Kramer, Joyce Miller and Nancy Gulla in "Ernest in Love" at the Hidden Hills Players.

The management at the Back Alley, with an eye towards community involvement, has established the policy of having knowledgeable guests (such as child psychologists) chair a post-play discussion Wednesday nights - about the problems intrinsic to the plot. I found it particularly interesting that most of the questions came from the seniors in the audience. Also a cast member, Jeffrey Rogers, stayed to participate. This shows great dedication on Jeffrey's part since, in Equity Waiver productions, the actors are not paid. I've been told that, besides the possibility of being seen by representatives from the TV and film industries, the sheer artistic

fulfillment of participating in live theatre is rewarding. Beyond that, Jeffrey freely gave of his own time after a physically gruelling performance. I think that's great!

"Found A Peanut" runs until Sept. 21 - performances Wednesday - Sunday at 8, Sunday matinee at 3 p.m. For reservations call the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 780-2240.



"FOUND A PEANUT"

Back Alley Theatre is back at it, bringing us innovative, original theatre pieces. This time, "Found A Peanut" by Donald Margulie takes us into the savage world of children. Like William Golding in his revelatory "Lord of the Flies," Margulie reveals the mythic nature of children: how the law of the jungle rules young lives and the personal belief of "fairness" is routinely violated.

Having adults play children always runs a risk of entering into mannered "cuteness." And the first few moments of "Found a Peanut" are precarious. But soon, the naturalistic, concentrated efforts of director Michael Arabian's ensemble takes us out of our disbelief and into the grimy backyard world of Mike, Jeffrey, Melody and Joanie.

The believability of the piece is aided by the completeness of the realistic set designed by Rich Rose, and the pervading sound, designed by Andrew McCarl.



Left to Right: Lycia Naff, Winifred Freedman, David O. Cameron, William DeAcutis, & Leslie Jordan (below). FOUND A PEANUT, directed by Michael Arabian at the Back Alley Theatre.

Mike (David Cameron) is the central character who is friends with a studious unpopular boy, Jeff (sensitively played by William De Acutis) who is teased at every opportunity by Scott, (Jeffrey Rogers) a slightly older boy. Mike wants Scott's friendship. But Scott is embarrassed at having to play with these younger kids, especially when Melody (a splendid performance by Lycia Naff) and her friend Joanie (Winifred Freedman) appear on the scene with their dolls. All of them only tolerate Little Earl, a toddler (Leslie Jordan), who mostly gets in the way. When Mike finds a dead bird and decides to bury it, he finds instead a buried bag of money which sets in motion the avarice of all the children and the brute force of two older kids, Ernie (Ben Mittleman) and Shane (Kenny D'Aquila). As the short play, acted without intermission, mounts in tension, we feel swept into the old feelings of dread we had as children when we had to face danger without the aid of our parents.

There are many fine moments in "Found A Peanut," but some of the best work is done by Ben Mittleman as the bully, Ernie. Sometimes it's difficult to pinpoint where the inspiration for a characterization lies: in this case, it could be in the writing, the suggestion of the director, or the inspiration of the actor. Mittleman, as Ernie, performs standard acts of violence against those smaller than he is with a sense that his emotions are running out of control - that he is really ashamed of himself, but at the same time, cannot help himself.

"Found A Peanut" continues Wednesdays through Sundays at 8:00, with Sunday matinee at 3 p.m., through August 10. Phone the Back Alley Theatre, located at 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, at 780-2240 for reservations and more information.