

THEATRE

by Richard M. Finder
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DORIAN! Harmon Avenue Theatre, 522 N. La Brea, L.A. Thur. thru Sat. 8, Sun. 7 & 10. \$12.50 to \$15. 851-3771.

COMMENTS: ROCK MUSICAL WITH DOWNBEAT ENDING.

FOUND A PEANUT, Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd. (off the S.D. F'way), Van Nuys 15321. Wed. thru Sun. 8, also Sun. 3. \$13 to \$15, half-price for "young people" accompanied by adult. (818) 780-2240.

COMMENTS: SMALL PLAY WITH SURPRISING DEPTHS, RECOMMENDED FOR ADULTS & CHILDREN.
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Found A Peanut, by contrast, delivers more than it promises, always a nice surprise. The play, which is runs without an intermission, opens as innocuously as an old "Our Gang" short subject, in a backyard, the last day of summer. The children are supposed to be aged 5 to 14. I had a problem with the actors being noticeably older than their supposed ages, and with the self-conscious cuteness of the characterizations. The fact that we need a sheet to know the supposed ages of the children, and are not told what grades they are about to begin, is an oversight which should be corrected.

The play is "about" betrayal and forgiveness (and loss of innocence, of course. That's what childhood is about.) Playwright Donald Margulies has written an intense, sensitive look at adult characteristics as they begin to emerge in children, all in all a considerable accomplishment. Mike (David O. Cameron) is awaiting Jay (who never shows up) and Scott, to play the last game of skelly of the summer. Jeff (William de Acutis) is a gawky, uncoordinated boy who isn't allowed to play, who idolizes Mike and bears the name Smolowitz, which in the language of children becomes "Small-wits".

Mike's sister, Melody (Lycia Naff, from the film Clan of the Cave Bear) and her overweight friend Joanie (Winifred Freedman) try, as sisters are wont to do, to join in the play. Little Earl (Leslie Jordan) is an appealing little boy, who has learned very young to be manipulative, even charming Ernie (Ben Mittleman) who, along with his brother Shane (Kenny D'Aquila) represent the "outside threat". This is a play about tribes: Ernie and Shane, who are probably going to become school dropouts, are not Jewish; the others are. Yet being of the same "tribe" (i.e., Jewish children in a public school) is not enough of a bond when the leader absent and the stakes are high enough to strain loyalties.

The night before the play opens, an old man has been found dead. He had a penchant for hiding money in strange places. Mike and Jeff, while burying a dead bird (I'm not going to touch the symbolism of that bird!), dig up a cache of small bills. In a children's world, where a quarter will buy a ball or a giant comic book, the implications of sixty-odd dollars are mind-boggling. Ethics are examined and discarded, and inventive excuses for self-interest are created. Loyalties are bought and sold, a kind of real-life game of Monopoly. An honest politician, remember, is one who "stays bought", a sophistication the children haven't yet developed. According to the psychology of the play, greed and betrayal are natural to young humans; generosity is not. For the sake of the play, we buy the premise.

To say more about the play would be to give away what is, when examined, a plot of some complexity. Suffice it to say that, cuteness aside, the characters are believable, the cuteness forgivable. Found A Peanut is worth the ticket and the trip to Van Nuys.