

THEATRE

Summer Play-Time

By Norman Kolpas

ACTIVE AS I KNOW Valley theatre to be, I remain surprised—pleasantly so—by the tremendous variety of productions that our local theatres are preparing for the spring-into-summer months.

There are world premieres and well-worn classics; comedies, dramas and musicals; straightforward presentations and concepts on the cutting edge of theatrical innovation. Such a season speaks not merely of the liveliness of the theatres, their companies and directors; it's a clear sign that Valley audiences are open, active and even daring in their theatre-going habits. This season is yours, and it will really come to life with your support.

ACTORS ALLEY REPERTORY THEATRE

4334 Van Nuys Blvd.
Sherman Oaks; 986-7440.

THE ACTORS ALLEY is one of a handful of local theatres that have lately gone the enterprising route of taking on a resident dramatist, who works with the company to develop his body of work. Such a system can develop, in effect, a creative hothouse in which the playwright's unique talents can flourish as they would not in the outside world.

The hothouse talent in this case is Dennis Clontz, an award-winning young playwright who was last represented on the Actors Alley stage last fall with "Two By Clontz," a double-bill comprised of two one-acts: "Match Made in Heaven" and "American Play." I found the former endearingly offbeat; a warped sitcom about two modern losers who meet and fall in love. The latter, with a surrealistic cast of characters including Annie Oakley, Billy the Kid, Jack and Bobby Kennedy, Elmer Fudd and Bugs Bunny, started off

just as wackily confused, and ended with a disturbingly—and I felt gratuitously—violent view of contemporary American society.

You might get the feeling that I'm not sure if I like Dennis Clontz. You're right. I'm reserving judgement, and I'm glad to have the chance to watch his work develop. You can be sure I'll see his latest play, "The Night Breath," now showing through May 23. It has been described to me by Actors Alley member D. J. Harner as "a surrealistic drama dealing with the death of an unidentified woman in a barn fire in 1907."

If that sounds like a bit of a daunting prospect, breathe a sigh of relief on May 30 and go see the return engagement of the Actors Alley's hugely successful production from last summer: the stage musical version of journalist Studs Terkel's "Working." Its realistic depiction of a wide cross-section of ordinary working Americans is wonderfully bracing, and in its gentle way, it taps into the recent rebirth of American pride. "Working" closes, appropriately, on the Fourth of July. From mid-July to the end of August, they will present the winner of the Actors Alley's first national playwrighting competition, not yet selected at press time. And the summer closes with "Serenading Louie," an early work by Lanford Wilson, one of our country's most talented contemporary playwrights. If you were lucky enough to see one of his more recent works like "Tally's Folly" or "Fifth of July," you know how sensitively and touchingly he examines modern relationships and the state of society.

ACTORS FORUM

3365½ Cahuenga Blvd. West
Hollywood; (213) 850-9016.

THE ACTORS FORUM, on the fringes of the Valley just beyond Universal City, was dark for a large portion of 1985, even though they won five Drama Logue Awards for their 1984 season. They've reopened now and, says co-artistic director Audrey Marlin, "I'd like the audience to rediscover us."

Chances of a rediscovery are likely with the ambitious, possibly groundbreaking, plans the Actors Forum has for this summer. During the spring, they were negotiating for stage rights to an as-yet-undisclosed classic film by Swedish director Ingmar Bergman. Marlin feels her 50-seat theatre has just the right "personal atmosphere" for translating Bergman's intimate form of cinematic storytelling. I'm anticipating an evening, at worst, interesting; at best, magical.

THE BACK ALLEY THEATRE

15231 Burbank Blvd.
Van Nuys; 780-2240.

MORE THAN A YEAR ago, I reported the Back Alley's plans to produce "The Greeks," British playwright Kenneth Cavander's brilliant adaptation of the classic Greek plays tracing the Trojan Wars and the fall of the House of Atreus. Sadly, the production never happened, as two different directors pulled out of the mammoth project, and eventually the theatre's rights to the play expired.

But those rights have been extended,

"really only because of Kenneth Cavanaugh's belief in our doing the project," according to producing director Laura Zucker. Happily, "The Greeks" is finally slated for an April 19 opening, and is playing through June 1. Directing is the Back Alley's own Allan Miller, whose skills—judging on such past tour-de-forces as "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?"—are definitely up to the daunting task of guiding 35 actors in nine separate plays, condensed into three consecutive evenings of theatre. The production includes an original instrumental score by local avant-garde composer Bunny Andrews, performed live on synthesizer, woodwinds and percussion.

When "The Greeks" premiered at the Royal Shakespeare Company in London in 1979, the British press called it "instantly accessible," "spellbinding" and "an astonishing coup." I urge you to see it, and predict that its brief run will be extended well into the summer.

BURBANK THEATRE GUILD

1111 W. Olive
Burbank (in George Izay Park); 848-7791.

UNTIL NOW, theatre-goers have had to leave the Valley to enjoy the summertime tradition of Shakespeare in the open air. But the Burbank Theatre Guild is perfectly placed to change that situation, located as they are in their own separate building at the back of a public park. Patrick Pankhurst, artistic director, has plans for "a really joyous event" in June, as his players move outdoors to present "A Midsummer Night's Dream" from "sundown into darkness." While exact dates had not yet been set at the time of writing, Pankhurst does promise a performance on Midsummer's Eve, June 23.

It should cause quite a splash in the community, but nothing like what occurred last November when the Guild presented "Gate 11," a play about international terrorism. When intermission came, the actor "hijackers" led the audience out into the park at gunpoint. One night, a neighbor across the street from the park glanced out her window at the wrong moment and dialed 911; the Burbank police stormed the park. So it's safe to expect that this "Dream" will definitely not be a modern-dress, political reinterpretation of Shakespeare's play.

THE GNU THEATRE

10426 Magnolia Blvd.
Toluca Lake; 508-5344.

FOLLOWING THEIR impressive production of "Best Wishes"—which garnered



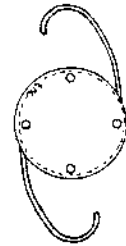
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critical raves and had its initial one-month run extended for six months—Jeff Seymour and Elizabeth Reilly have bitten off an even more ambitious chunk of theatre with Michael Weller's "Loose Ends," playing now at least until June.

"It's a lot to chew," says Reilly. "We're daring a lot more, but we're ready for it." Where "Best Wishes" had a tight central ensemble of six actors, "Loose Ends" has a cast of 11. The former play was staged with a single, vividly detailed period farmhouse set; the new production has six different sets, including apartments in New York City, New Hampshire and Boston, and a beach in Bali. And while the action of "Best Wishes" occurred in two acts over a two-day period, the nine scenes in Weller's play cover a decade, 1970-1979.

Seymour, who directs, and Reilly, the production's designer, star as two children of the '60s who meet on that Balinese beach at the beginning of the "Me Decade." They drift apart, then meet again and fall in love, their lives following and paralleling the events of that 10-year span. Throughout the play, nine friends and acquaintances come and go, their own lives dancing to the rhythms of the decade. Michael Weller is a master at capturing the subtleties and absurdities of the baby boomer generation, and Reilly revels in his "side-splittingly funny, wonderful dialogue."

The play's title, she explains, refers simply to the fact that "we all have loose ends, things that aren't neatly tied up in our lives." Don't let this latest Gnu offering become one of the loose ends in your own.

THE GROUP REPERTORY THEATRE

10900 Burbank Blvd.
North Hollywood; 769-PLAY.

IF YOU SOMETIMES find period-costumed classics unapproachable, you might want to try "In Search of Chekhov's 'Uncle Vanya,'" a new look at the play adapted and directed by Group Rep artistic director Lonny Chapman. In this "play within a play," Chapman shows us the final bare-stage-and-street-clothes run-through of a production of Vanya, as the on-stage director urges his cast to "create a sense of the Russia of 100 years ago with our own modern American sensibilities, without the sets and the costumes." Chapman has the professionalism, I think, to avoid the kind of gimmickry that often permeates such a radical approach, and it can be illuminating to hear and see Chekhov's words and actions without the

frock coats and floor-length dresses, the chaise lounges and samovars.

Following in June is "Primary Colors" by Lynn Rosen, an evening of poetry and music portraying the four stages of a woman's life. "She's very talented," says Chapman of Rosen. "I love her writing. It presents a very good potential to work theatrically." Personally, I look upon evenings of dramatized poetry (*not* to be confused with drama written in poetic form) with unswerving dread—though I still remember the vivid and delightful surprise I felt when I first saw poet Ntozake Shange's "For Colored Girls. . . ." Perhaps I'll be surprised again.

MEGAW THEATRE

17601 Saticoy St.
Northridge; 881-8166.

FOR 13 YEARS, the Megaw has presented neatly tailored productions of great and little-known theatrical classics. The latest, opening May 2, is "The Boss" by Edward Sheldon, a play originally written and produced in 1911. It deals with two major social issues of the day, which still strike chords of relevance three-quarters of a century later: immigration and trade unionism. The action follows a scrappy young Irish immigrant named Reagan, who through sheer determination takes over an old family-owned Boston company, marries the owner's daughter and attempts to fight off the growing union movement.

But it wasn't the subject of the play that attracted director Sydney Morrison so much as its old-fashioned craft. "I like story plays with a beginning, middle and end," she says. "I hate plays where everything happens in the first act. In 'The Boss,' you don't know what the ending is going to be until the end of the play!" Personally, I find such period pieces remarkably predictable to the point of being humdrum; but if you're after a good story more than a piece of dynamic, risk-taking theatre, this could be right for you.

"The Boss" closes on June 22. It will be followed in July by the Megaw's annual summer musical, "the most expensive of our shows," says Morrison. The show had not yet been selected at press time, but the theatre's musical director, Diane Burt, was able to say, "You won't find us doing another production of 'Oklahoma' or 'Fiddler on the Roof.' We look for works that are a little bit more obscure."

"Obscure," adds Morrison, "in the sense that they're just not seen so often." Judging on past productions—which have included "Carnival," "Kiss Me, Kate,"

"The Boyfriend," "Little Mary Sunshine" and "Very Good Eddie"—you can be sure of seeing a production high in both interest and quality.

THE VICTORY THEATRE

3326 West Victory Blvd.
Burbank; 843-9253.

THE VICTORY has presented some of the most innovative theatre in Los Angeles since its opening in the spring of 1980. That innovative spirit continues with its John Ford Noonan Festival, planned to open toward the end of this month and run until late July or August.

Noonan is best known for his play "A Coupla White Chicks. . ." an acclaimed comedy that had long runs in New York, Los Angeles and around the country during the past five years. "I love his work," says Tom Ormeny, co-artistic director of The Victory, citing Noonan's "slightly askew, slightly fey, slightly psychic approach." Ormeny continues, "I think he is one of the most sensitive playwrights in America today."

The four plays that make up the festival have never before been produced, and will be presented in repertory as two double-bills. Each program will open in The Victory's small 42-seat house with a one-act play about baseball. "All She Talks About Is the Yankees" is a one-character piece that examines the poignant plight of an agoraphobic woman whose only contact with the outside world is through cassette-taped messages she sends to the ballplayers at Yankee Stadium. "You Can Ask the Babe Anything" looks at hero Babe Ruth in his 50s as he fights what he calls "the gloomies," touring the country promoting sporting goods and answering the questions of admiring young fans. Two charming ideas for playlets, and Ormeny will enhance the charm by serving hot dogs and snow cones outside on the sidewalk before part two of each bill.

Ending the evening in the larger 72-seat theatre will be either "The Critic and His Wife," which examines the embattled homelife of a New York City theatre critic before a major opening night, or "Talking Things Over with Chekhov"—a close look at the relationship between a young playwright and an actress who mistakenly believes he's writing his latest play for her. Ormeny sums up the two offerings as dealing with "ambition, and what happens to people because of it." Ambitious though its Festival plans are, it looks like The Victory could well meet with continued success this season. **W**