



Cast of "Bittersuite" includes Mara Finerty, left, Carol Woodbury, Bettina Devin, Mark McGee and Rick Roemer.

STAGE REVIEWS

'Bittersuite' Songs and 'Amazing Grace' at the Back

By DON SHIRLEY

Bittersuite: Songs of Experience," a revue at Back Alley Theatre, is for mature audiences. People whose lives haven't worked out quite the way they had planned. People who have learned to make do. People with a sense of irony.

Most of the 26 songs in "Bittersuite," with music by Elliot Weiss and lyrics by Michael Champagne, are about aging and adjustment, disillusionment and discovery. But they're not all wistful and gooeey. In between the sighs, this is one of the funnest shows in town.

It's also one of the most polished. Rick Roemer's cast (including himself) has every moment firmly in hand—and firmly in voice.

This production just might be better than the one that's playing in New York, for Roemer has restored a fifth character—a middle-aged woman (Carol Woodbury) who was dropped from the current New York revival. She supplements the other two women and two men, who are all of the "thirtysomething" generation, in a manner that seems indispensable, considering the theme of the show.

Or maybe it's just that Woodbury is so terrific in the role. She projects a tangible presence even when she's sitting silently at the back of the stage, watching the younger generation. Then, when she finally goes into high gear, in a knock-about number called "Pay the Piper," she sizzles. It's as if you suddenly learn that your high school English teacher has a yen for young gigolos.

In the second act, when Woodbury sings the amusing "I've Got to Be Famous," it's easy to imagine

that her wish will come true.

The younger singers are just as impressive, if not quite as distinctive. Mark McGee switches effortlessly between the gigolo in "Pay the Piper" and his opposite in "The Apology" (if only this character could meet Julia Sweeney's Mea Culpa in "Mea's Big Apology").

Roemer pulls off a similar stunt, jumping between the star of "The Narcissism Rag" and a lonely guy at his "Twentieth Reunion." Together, Roemer and McGee sing a curdled toast to spiked friendship, "I'll Be There."

Mara Finerty makes magic out of "Soap Opera," a haunting song about a former friendship, and then she and Roemer transform "The Recipe," one long double-entendre of the sort not often found on the food pages, into a scintillating musical confection.

Bettina Devin delivers a heart-felt rendition of the better of the show's two child-parent numbers, "Mama Don't Cry," and lurches through "The Cliche Waltz" in high comic style.

Of the ensemble numbers, the highlight is "Money Is Honey," a quartet that combines a loose, shambling feeling with the tightest of harmonies. "Snap Back," the quartet that opens the second act, is almost too snappy for its own good; a few of the lyrics are lost as the singers maneuver through intricate rhythms and steps.

But most of the choreography, by Dana Landers, is sound and seamless, uniting a batch of songs that are otherwise connected only tenuously by their common theme. And Nelms McKelvin's musical direction is impeccable, though it would be nice if he played a real piano instead of an electrified one.

There is more drama in any one of the songs within "Bittersuite" than in the entire "Amazing Grace," Sandra Deer's play which will share the Back Alley stage with "Bittersuite" this summer.

This isn't so much a play as it is a testimonial to its protagonist, Grace (Patricia Huston), a backwoods

psychic and channeler who now lives in a Malibu beach house (how she got there is never adequately explained) with her retarded but also psychically gifted grandson (Jim Hiestand).

As the play begins, a cop (Daryl Roach) enlists Grace's aid in solving a string of brutal murders. But Deer would rather glorify New Age doctrine than stoop to something so

conventional as to entertain the audience with a genuinely suspenseful narrative.

The plot is simply a device Deer uses to demonstrate the psychic's powers—as well as her utter goodness and probity. The cop and the play's other skeptic, a Hollywood actress (Carmen Duncan) who, despite her doubts, has bought the movie rights to Grace's life story, inevitably see the light and become converts to Grace's vision.

The same probably won't happen to audience members who aren't already among the converted. When Grace finally gives us a

sample of Teacher, the spirit whom she channels, the play loses whatever credibility it had; Teacher seems like an acting exercise, and not much of one at that. Allan Miller directed.

The Back Alley is at 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. "Bittersuite" plays Mondays through Wednesdays at 8 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays at 10 p.m., through Aug. 13. "Amazing Grace" plays Thursdays at 8 p.m., Fridays through Sundays at 7 p.m., with Sunday matinees at 2 p.m., through Aug. 14. Tickets: \$13.50-\$17.50. (818) 786-2240.

Alley