

Entertainer

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Stage

'Early Girl' too dramatic for own good

By Sandra Kreiswirth
THEATER CRITIC

Five dollars per minute. Payment up front. Prizes given for the most extras. Bathing suits in the summer. Evening gowns in the winter. No one leaves the premises except for a doctor's appointment once a week. No phone calls allowed. No mail except for merchandise catalogs.

These are the cardinal rules. Break 'em, and you're history.

This is "Early Girl" at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys — Carolyn Kava's finely detailed, but at times melodramatic, look at the lives of six working girls and their madam in the best house of prostitution a small Western town has to offer.

It's the best because Lana, the madam who ends her sentences with snippets of French and Italian and dresses to the nines, keeps it that way by enforcing her cardinal rules. After all, they are made for the benefit of everyone.

She calls her girls diamonds and insists they eat properly. "Your health is your most valuable asset," she tells them. "Shirley MacLaine said that in an interview."

And she pays well — 40 cents on the dollar, plus tips. If you're the No. 1 girl, it's possible to make \$20,000 in a single month.

Laurel (Kim Lankford) is No. 1 this month. She's the quietest. In the common kitchen/sitting room where the play takes place, Laurel spends her free time reading her Book of the Month Club selections and eating mints out of a small petit point box.

Jean (Lisa Pelikan) is No. 4. She's the early girl, the one who has to get up first to take care of any crack-of-dawn trade. She's been at Lana's for three



"The Early Girl" stars, front row, from left, Denise Gordy, Siobhan E. McCafferty, Lisa Pelikan and, back row, Tracy Shaffer, Deborah Sandland, Morgan Lofting and Kim Lankford.

months, and there's little chance of her winning any prizes for anything. The most caustic of the bunch, she doesn't know how to lie. But she ends up being the most sensitive.

George (Debra Sandlund) is breaking a cardinal rule by falling in love with a John. And Pat (Tracy Shaffer) buys everything she sees in those catalogs if she wanted to. She's too encumbered.

Enter Lily, the new girl. Fresh from Las Vegas, where she's left her baby daughter with a friend. She says she's 18, but that's doubtful. It really

doesn't matter. Unbeknownst to Lana, who is quite taken with her, Lily plans to stay only a month, the time it will take to rake in \$20,000 if she's No. 1. And before the play is through, not only will she have earned that title and that sum, but she also will have left behind any innocence she once appeared to have. Way behind.

Kava's at her best establishing the mundane routine of this septet — the call to the parlor, the depositing of the up-front money, the selection of the extras (oils, vibrators, films) from the kitchen cupboards, the setting of the timers and the dia-

appearance into the rooms. The tricks are never seen. It's not their story.

What we do see is the day-in, day-out flatness of these women's lives. They pour coffee into colored, monogrammed mugs. They in no way look like prostitutes. They could very well be housewives instead of hookers. They all have pasts, and several of them are interesting enough to make us want to know their futures.

It's when they get overly dramatic that things go downhill, especially when it happens in full voice. And under producing director Allan Miller's direction

REVIEW

THE EARLY GIRL, a contemporary comedy by Carolyn Kava. Set design by Derek McLane, lighting design by Ken Garrison, costume design by Meg Gilbert, sound design by Fred Wardbury, directed by Allan Miller, produced by Laura Zucker at the Back Alley Theater, 16251 Bluntank Blvd. Van Nuys, 6 p.m. Thu., Sat., 2 and 7 p.m. Sun., through Sept. 27. Tickets: \$13.50-\$17.50. Information: (818) 780-2243.

Lily.....	Siobhan E. McCafferty
Sally.....	Denise Gordy
Laurel.....	Kim Lankford
Lora.....	Morgan Lofting
Jean.....	Lisa Pelikan
George.....	Debra Sandlund
Pat.....	Tracy Shaffer

(a late replacement for James Gardner), that happens too often, especially between Lily and Jean, to consider this one of the Back Alley's better productions at this point.

Most interesting of the group is Morgan Lofting as Lana. She looks like a B-movie star, playing her sense of mystery while always in control. Kim Lankford's Laurel has the same quality. We know just a little about her, and it interests us. Tracy Shaffer's electronic gadget-laden, wig-crazy Pat is the comedy relief, and she provides it with skill.

Oddly enough, the main characters of Jean and, to a lesser degree, Lily are the least satisfying. Pelikan, usually on the money in every role she plays, pushes too hard here. She seems to still be finding her character. And while Siobhan E. McCafferty, who replaced Kim Delaney while this show was in previews, is very believable, she's always racing around acting intense. A directorial choice?

Kava has written an interesting play. Charting prostitutes' climb up the corporate ladder is a clever notion even if the ending is too pat, or at least played too pat. Given the talent on stage and the track record at the Back Alley, the hope is the company will get it together.