

ARTS

& ENTERTAINMENT

'Early Girl': better late than never

By TOM JACOBS
Daily News Theater Critic

Caroline Kava is used to people asking if she was ever a prostitute. In a way, the question is a compliment.

Her drama about the inner workings of a house of prostitution, "The Early Girl," seemed so realistic when it was staged at New York's Circle Repertory Company last year that some playgoers assumed she had firsthand knowledge of her subject.

In fact, she does — though not quite in the way they mean.

The play, which will have its West Coast premiere Saturday at the Back Alley in Van Nuys, grew out of three days and nights the playwright and actress spent at a house of prostitution in 1979. She had been cast as a frontier prostitute in the now-infamous bloated-budget western "Heaven's Gate" and part of her preparation for the role consisted of observing these professionals at work.

Kava never got a chance to bring



ROGER W. VARGO / DAILY NEWS



"The play's a lot about Kava's

time we got to the house-of-prostitution scene, United Artists had started to ease the plug out of 'Heaven's Gate.'" she said in a recent interview in a Toluca Lake restaurant. "So after taking 46 million takes on everything else, the scene was shot quickly, and I had no time to use the research."

That was frustrating. "I knew something that I wanted to tell somebody. I rang up a friend of mine in New York and told her (about the goings-on). She said, 'Do you have a tape recorder. Keep talking, but turn it on. You may get a play out of this. You never know.'"

Six years of writing and rewriting and attending staged readings and doing still more rewriting later, she indeed had a play, and a good one — at least in the view of *The New York Times*. Critic Mel Gussow praised the way "she shrewdly delineates a self-degrading society."

Emotional deja vu

It was a society that gave Kava a creepy feeling of emotional *deja vu*.

"They were so much like me," she said of the prostitutes. "They weren't like the prostitutes in New York. They were my age. They were bright. I thought they could have done anything (with their lives). This was the first time (I perceived) someone like me was a prostitute. That had impact."

But the connection went far deeper than that.

"When I met these women, I was so surprised to find something re-

sounding in me," she said. "I really identified on some kind of deep level with what they were going through."

"I stayed in the kitchen area, which is where the play takes place. The kitchen area and the parlor area are for the women. That's where the women wait. It's their part of the house. I would see them go to and from (their clients). I'd see them get their paraphernalia from the kitchen and put their money in a drawer."

"They'd leave for 20 or 30 minutes, then come back, have a cup of coffee, work on a puzzle, whatever. They worked from 5 p.m. to 6 a.m. There was an 'early girl' who started at three."

"It was an incredibly claustrophobic, uncomfortable experience, but I felt I couldn't leave, which was so odd. I could have left at any time but, I thought, 'I'm supposed to stay here.'"

"That's the button that got pushed in me. My time is at the disposal of strangers. Not my intimate being, but . . . there was a resonance there."

Kava started to recall conversations from her past.

"I've got to stay in New York. I know there's this job in Podunk, but you never know when that

phone's going to ring.' Or, 'Yeah, I'd love to take a vacation with you, honey, but something could come up.'"

"I was raised on a lot of myths of the waiting game. I think if you play the waiting game, luck plays a big part of it. If you don't play the waiting game, luck isn't so important. You're out there creating opportunities."

"The play's a lot about playing by your own rules. The madam has a whole set of cardinal rules, which she whimsically breaks or keeps, depending on what's in her best interest. But the girls adhere to them."

"It's about how you can't really have your own life if you live by somebody else's rules. And you are living by somebody else's rules if you're waiting for them to call you when they need you."

Thus writing the play was cathartic for Kava in a couple of ways. In working out some of her own problems through her characters, she simultaneously went a long way toward overcoming them. Rather than waiting for someone to cast her in a part, she was doing creative, fulfilling work on her own.

Long, slow process

That is not to say it was easy.



by your own rules," says Caroline Kava, above, author of "The Early Girl," starring at left, clockwise from left, Debra Sandlund, Kim Lankford, Morgan Lofting, Tracy Shaffer, Lisa Pelikan, Kim Delaney and Denise Gordy.

Kava got help and encouragement from such playwright friends as Lanford Wilson and Christopher Durang. But writing the play still proved to be a long, slow process.

"I had so many readings of this play that my peers as actresses got too old for the parts," she recalled with a laugh. "They kept saying, 'Kava, when are you going to get this together?' I've been told my next play should be about geriatric people, because by the time I finish it, we'll all be old!"

Kava's first stage experience came when she was quite young. A student at an all-girls Catholic school in Chicago, she realized that the best way to meet boys — and get invited to a prom — was to perform in the theater productions of a nearby all-boys high school.

She landed a spot in the chorus of "Annie Get Your Gun," got her prom date — and found a career.

After studying in Chicago and Poland, Kava moved to New York and eventually found success in the off-Broadway theater. Between plays and occasional movies, she began to write, completing "the obligatory first autobiographical play" before turning to "The Early Girl."

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