

# 'Early Girl' a hard-edged portrayal of prostitution

By TOM JACOBS  
Daily News Theater Critic

"The Early Girl" is about seduction, but it's only incidentally about sex.

Caroline Kava's examination of the behind-the-scenes workings of a house of prostitution, which had its **REVIEW** West Coast premiere this week-

end at the Back Alley Theatre, basically is about the seductiveness of slavery. The playwright vividly portrays an existence that's utterly degrading, ultimately dehumanizing, and oddly comforting.

The plot concerns the arrival of a "new girl" to the house — an 18-year-old (or so she says) who has a new baby and insists she'll only be there for a month. Her initiation and gradual realization of what she's gotten herself into provide the play with its dramatic drive.

But the real interest here is the setting. Kava convincingly traces the day-to-day life of a "working girl," etching in the smallest, most fascinating details.

The women work from 5 p.m. to 6 a.m. (except for the "early girl," who starts at 3). Whips, honey and other accessories are stored in the kitchen cabinet. The refrigerator is stocked with fruit and cheese; good health being essential to good performance, no junk food is allowed.

Like most people in sales, the prostitutes are paid on a commission basis. Competitiveness is encouraged; the employee who takes in the most cash at the end of each month gets a little prize, such as an emerald bracelet.

## THE FACTS

- **The play:** "The Early Girl."
- **Where:** Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.
- **When:** 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday, through Sept. 27.
- **Starring:** Lisa Pelikan, Kim Lankford, Siobhan McCafferty.
- **Behind the scenes:** Written by Caroline Kava. Directed by Allan Miller.
- **Tickets:** \$13.50 to \$17.50. For more information, call (818) 780-2240.
- **Our rating:** A.

Most interesting, though, are Kava's portrayals of the women themselves. In a sense, "The Early Girl" is a female version of "The Iceman Cometh," in which each of the characters finds a different means of self-deception to deny the level to which she has dropped.

Laurel (Kim Lankford) constantly reads. George (Debra Sandlund) has an imaginary love affair going with one of her more handsome clients. Pat (Tracy Shaffer) keeps buying things — electronic gadgets, mostly. Only Jean (Lisa Pelikan), the former UCLA English major, hasn't

found a way to fool herself, as a result she's cynical, bitter, sarcastic.

The climax — which concerns her co-workers' reaction to Jean's decision on whether to leave — isn't entirely convincing. But Kava's characters are well-drawn, her dialogue sharp and funny. And her major point — that it's difficult to leave an existence where all your choices are made for you, where you are lifted from the burden of free will — is made with wonderful clarity.

The director and an actress in a major role were replaced during rehearsals, which suggests a troubled production. Happily, however, it doesn't show. Allan Miller's direction is smooth and snappy, the performances by the leads superb.

Siobhan McCafferty, a late replacement in the key role of Lily, the new girl, is very fine. After beautifully getting across the character's good-natured naivete, she conveys the horror and pain Lily feels on her first night of work with shattering effectiveness.

Pelikan is nicely wound up and worn down. As Lana, the slyly manipulative madam, Morgan Lofting has just the right combination of kindness and firmness.

## CRITICS' CHOICE

FRIDAY, AUGUST 28, 1987

### STAGE

**Take an 'Early' look:** "The Early Girl," Caroline Kava's comedy-drama about the behind-the-scenes activity at a house of prostitution, is a multilayered play. Full of fascinating detail about the day-to-day lives of these women, it also draws some uncomfortable parallels between their world and our own.

These ladies — portrayed by such fine actresses as Lisa Pelikan and Kim Lankford —

have chosen to live a life of degrading conformity rather than take the risks associated with freedom.

This vivid, funny play continues its West Coast premiere production at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday through Sept. 27 at the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. Tickets are \$13.50 to \$17.50. call (818) 780-2240.

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