

"The Early Girl"

by Dale Reynolds

There is an earthy sort of appeal about prostitutes. I suppose every person who has not actually performed sexual stunts for money has wondered from time-to-time "Why do they do it? Aren't they degraded? And just how do you achieve that position?" But to the women who work at this profession (and no, it's not the world's oldest—farming and carpentry pre-date it) they often consider themselves just "working girls." Girls who wait. And that is, at bottom, what this play is about.

Caroline Kava's comedy is set in a "house of prostitution in a mining town out West." Lana (Morgan Lofting), an ex-girl, runs a simple house of six girls (never "women," I gather) who can earn bucks until age 30, when they are turned out to pasture, or whatever they do afterwards. A new-girl, Lily, has just arrived, desperate for the potential \$20,000 she may earn the first month. She has a young child at home and only wants enough to ensure her survival later on. She is an eager-beaver and out-works all the others, including Jean, the cynical wise-acre, who is the Early Girl, the women who work the 4-6 pm shift before the others start their 11-hour shifts.

Kava's script is just a tad rosy; none of the girls minds the long hours of the, ah, varied aspects of the job. They live cosily for the most part, and Lana makes it all so homey. While it must be stated clearly up front that I know little directly about these women's working conditions, it struck me as rather stress-less, and even fun! One may wonder about the reality of that

Caroline Kava's play, "The Early Girl" plays through September 27 at the Back Alley Theatre. Directed by Allan Miller, it features Morgan Lofting, Lisa Pelikan and Siobhan E. McCafferty, and plays Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 pm, Sundays at 2 & 7 pm. Reservations may be made at 818/780-2240. The Back Alley is located at 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.

perception.

This is a comedy; with some lively and good dialog (Kava is an actress) but with the problem created by the revolving-door directors, she has not been given much help (Allan Miller replaced James Gardner, and as a consequence, understudy Siobhan E. McCafferty replaced the departing Kim Delaney as Lily). Sunday night the tensions and rhythms were off, with the actors tending to meander when not in full run. The character relationships were slippery, and it's hard to judge how much of that is the lack of direction and how much is in the script. I felt it could have been trimmed somewhat. The play is rather straight-forwardly scripted but the focus gets skewed in the second act. Why is Jean suddenly the center of our attention while Lily gets shifted slightly? It's not that you can't do it, but it wasn't set up before. In this rather well-made play, it becomes a curious shift.

But all of these blips pale beside the lack of direction. If Gardner was unable to solve the inherent problems and make the play work, Miller has not fixed them either. There's an incompleteness to it all. The relationships and realities are glossed over; just what does Lana want from her "girls"?



The hookers of "The Early Girl."

why is there no overt lesbian relationship that supposedly exists among prostitutes?; how does this house survive the law?

Seven incredibly beautiful women have been cast as these demimondes and all of them are at the very least adequate, with two outstanding: Morgan Lofting, luminous and sexy, who is well-remembered for her "A Late Show" a few years back; and Kim Lankford as Laurel, the aging been-there-and-am-not-impressed one. I liked Debra Sandlund and Siobhan McCafferty as well. Lisa Pelikan, as Jean, would have made a better and more lasting impression if only her theatre-voice were listenable. It's truly amazing to see a good actress with credits a mile-long (including the classics) and

such untrained equipment. The end-result is not merely to be low and sexy (like Lofting) but rather to carry the emotion and to clearly project it. When she gets rolling deep into the play, one is apt to shut-off listening because of the unpleasantness of the tinny voice.

Derek McLane's set is practical and pretty, but I got awfully confused by the placement of the girls' rooms and the entrance way; with all the running in-and-out (these girls work hard) it got mentally messy. Meg Gilber's costumes are a knockout, and witty besides.

It's a pity "The Early Girl" opened without getting fixed; there's a real interesting play inside it somewhere.