

WESTSIDE / VALLEY

Success Isn't Bittersweet for Hit Show 'Bittersuite'

By MIKE WYMA

In the world of small theater, where shows can have the life span of a moth, "Bittersuite" at the Back Alley Theatre has turned into Methuselah.

The musical revue, which opened in June, recently was extended for the second time and will run through Feb. 12.

"It has succeeded beyond my wildest dreams," said Rick Roemer, who directs, co-produces and appears in the show. "When you're competing with lots of other small theaters, 3 months is a long time, and we'll have a 9-month run."

But Roemer does not consider "Bittersuite" a surprise hit. After appearing in the show in New York and San Francisco, he became convinced of its audience appeal. Roemer bought the rights for a Los Angeles production from the New York authors, composer Elliot Weiss and lyricist Michael Champagne, and approached the Back Alley.

"Bittersuite" is a collection of 26 original songs. It received uniformly enthusiastic reviews locally. There is no plot, although the songs treat the emotional mine fields of

youth and adulthood. This is done with a calculated ambiguity in lyrics that allows audience members to fill in the blanks with specifics of their own triumphs and heartbreaks.

"This play shows how you assume roles in life, how you are one thing and also take on the reciproc-

cal thing," theatergoer Roberta Sengstack said during intermission at a recent "Bittersuite" performance.

"You're the son, you're the father, you're the lover," said Sengstack, who lives in Santa Monica. "You're all the roles in your relations to other people."

Laura Zucker, co-producer at the Back Alley Theatre, said "Bittersuite's" run is the second-longest in the history of the house. The longest was "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?," which ran for 18 months several years ago. Part of the run took place at another theater on a loan arrangement, she said, so "Bittersuite" holds the record for continuous

longevity.

At least half the audience comes from the San Fernando Valley, she said, with most of the rest from West Los Angeles. The theater's Burbank Boulevard location is a few blocks east of the San Diego Freeway.

The show has been particularly advantageous to the Back Alley because the theater can run two plays at once, with "Bittersuite" pulling crowds at times when many small houses remain dark. The present schedule has it appearing Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 8 p.m. and Saturdays at 2 and 10 p.m.

"The Fox" by Allan Miller takes the stage at the more traditional times of 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays and 7 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays, with Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. "The Fox" is the third play to be staged in repertory with the hit musical.

"The alternative time slots were risky, but 'Bittersuite' has done so much to pave the way, having people come to this theater on alternative times and days," Zucker said.

Overhead at the 93-seat house is the same no matter how many shows are running, she said, so

income from two plays has enabled the Back Alley to hold down ticket prices despite increases in rent and liability insurance. Tickets are \$14.50 and \$18.50, with a variety of student and senior discounts available.

Previous attempts at producing two plays were a strain on the Back Alley's management, Zucker said, a problem that is alleviated by an unusual co-production arrangement with Roemer.

"We provide quite a bit of the marketing, and Rick's responsible for what happens on stage," she said. "He casts and directs. We split the box office down the middle. That saves us paying artists, royalties, costumes, programs and so on."

Roemer said he pays actors a percentage of his share of the gate. With a five-person cast, including himself, plus a pianist, costs remain relatively low. Actors have earned an average of \$15 to \$17 per performance, and he makes a living from the production, Roemer said.

"It's not what I consider a real living," he said. "No one is getting rich out of this, but we get to do theater."

Over the months, there have been several changes in the cast.

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long, you don't keep people with you," Roemer said. "The maintenance of this show has been harder than staging it originally. I'm always rehearsing people, arranging group sales, doing advertising."

He believes that the show's appeal is twofold.

"This is material the people have never heard before. It's not just another Sondheim or Jacques Brel revue. Not that there's anything wrong with Sondheim or Brel, but with us, the audience has to listen. After the first two songs, they become involved, and there are enough emotional extremes to keep them interested."

But heady explanations about the material don't explain everything, he said.

"It's not just the content. It's theatrical too. It's brightly costumed; it's choreographed well. You leave feeling satisfied."

There is no chance that "Bittersuite" will be extended beyond Feb. 12, Roemer said.

"There's a limit to the audience and, by then, I'll be ready to move onto something else."

Roemer and the Back Alley will co-produce another musical, both parties said, although the show has yet to be selected. □