

VALLEY CALENDAR

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Indulging in 'The Cliche Waltz' are Carol Woodbury, from left, Bettina Devin, actor-director Rick Roemer, Mark McGee and Mara Finerty.

By MIKE WYMA

The audience at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys reacted tentatively, as if they didn't know what to make of this musical. Their reserve was odd, for "Bittersuite: Songs of Experience," which opened this month, has drawn enthusiastic reactions and favorable reviews.

But when actor-director Rick Roemer broke into "Narcissism Rag," the audience came alive. They roared as he strutted through the story of a chest-puffing, self-loving lady-killer.

*Every mornin' when I wake,
I am more than even I can take.
On the street they all stop and stare
At this perfect derriere.*

The number seemed to break the ice, and the five-member cast established a rapport with the crowd for the remainder of the evening. In the dressing room afterward, Roemer talked about the initial uncertainty.

"The material is a little different," he said. "Maybe they came expecting to see a frothy, standard kind of musical. It's too bad, because this is such an audience-ori-

'Bittersuite' Flashes of Song Recognition

Audiences See Themselves in Musical's Melody

ented show. The audience sees themselves in it."

Roemer's high opinion of "Bittersuite" comes as no surprise. He was a member of the cast when the show first opened in New York in 1984, and he went to San Francisco for a lengthy run there. He believed in the show strongly enough to find co-investors and buy the rights for the current run at the Back Alley, scheduled through Aug. 13.

Reviewers have backed him up. "Bittersuite" was singled out as a critic's

choice by the L.A. Weekly, the Daily News and Drama-Logue. The Times' Don Shirley wrote: "In between sighs, this is one of the funniest shows in town."

There is no plot. The evening's 26 songs, written by New Yorkers Elliot Weiss and Michael Champagne, are connected only in that most treat the downside of growing up. In some instances the singers have adjusted when expectations fell short. Other times they have not. Some songs are humorous, some bitter, some both.

"The basis for the appeal is recognition," lyricist Champagne said. "What the audience finds appealing is that they recognize themselves and people they know. The emotions expressed in the songs seem to ring the right bells."

For cast member Bettina Devin, the most poignant song is "Mama Don't Cry."

"It's special because it's the story of my mother and me, and every night I get a chance to talk to her," Devin said. "She's not dead, but she might as well be. She has Alzheimer's."

The song is that of a girl who feels she has disappointed her mother but is intent on shedding a sense of failure.

*Mama don't cry, I'm not pretty.
Mama don't cry, and I'm not young.
Mama don't sing me to sleep
With a lullaby that can't be sung.*

For composer Weiss, the special song is "Fathers & Sons."

"Sometimes you have a father who, even without saying it, wants you to do something, to be successful," Weiss explained. "I read an article about Donald Trump that he's still trying to please his father. . . . The man who sings this song is tormented."

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MUSICAL: Audiences See Themselves in the Songs

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Weiss said his father, who is living, composed a musical years ago that never was produced and wrote rock 'n' roll songs that missed becoming hits. Weiss said he grew up believing that success was imperative. In a gesture of closeness, he included snatches of melody from his father's failed musical in "Bittersuite."

The show has had two New York productions, the most recent a 14-month run at a dinner theater called Palsson's. Weiss said a Chicago company will form in the fall. He and partner Champagne hope the show becomes a standard, playing around the country.

The show has two advantages in touring and staging: low production costs and flexibility in organization. Since the songs don't follow a plot line, additions and deletions can be made to suit an audience.

"As Michael and I grow older and as society grows up," Weiss said, "we'll keep adding stuff. We've added songs already."

One of the songs dropped from the Back Alley production is about suicide, a subject fascinating to New Yorkers but a little dark for sunny Southern California. Another was about alcoholism.

In one of the replacement songs, a woman sings that she has "got to be famous tomorrow." Her 50th birthday is upon her, and she had vowed to be a success by then.

The character, played locally by Carol Woodbury of Sherman Oaks, was cut from some of the earlier productions. Reducing the cast

saves money and allows "Bittersuite" to be staged in nightclubs, as it was in San Francisco's Plush Room. The remaining four cast members are of the yuppie generation, so the older woman widens the show's possibilities.

Woodbury said the number she performs that draws the most audience identification is "Meg & Joe," the song of a woman trapped in a long-term marriage that lacks intimacy.

"Four or five women have told me that it touches very close at the anger of middle age," she said.

Weiss and Champagne said they planned from the start to write a "song cycle" (the name they prefer to the more frivolous-sounding "revue") that would be sophisticated, yet play to Middle America. Champagne said there is no contradiction there, because most Americans are quite sophisticated musically.

"We are bombarded with music from morning to night," he said. "Walk into a store and you might hear Cole Porter, classical, Gershwin, rock 'n' roll, country. It's become part of the American lexicon. We live at the center of our own movies and we have a lot of background music."

Many of the songs in "Bittersuite" are intentionally vague, a technique Champagne admires in Stephen Sondheim's work. "The Apology," for example, is sung by a guilt-ridden young woman:

I'm just so sick with dread and worry



The center of attention for 'Narcissism Rag' is Rick Roemer. With him are, from left, Bettina Devin, Carol Woodbury and Mara Finerty.

Sometimes I feel like Peter Lorre.

However, the singer never says what she is guilty about.

"When you don't define every image and minute of it, it has the greater impact," Champagne said. "It gives the audience room to draw their own interpretation. You fill in the blanks with your own life experience. Listen to a lot of Sondheim songs and they're very un-specific. 'Send in the Clowns,' you can apply that lyric to any situation and it works."

"Bittersuite" is the writing team's largest success to date, a fact they hope to change before long. The project was begun after the pair finished writing "Casanova," a musical that will require a much larger budget to produce.

"While we were waiting for the money to put that on, we decided to write just the opposite, something with no props that you can do

anywhere," Weiss said.

"Casanova" has been done in workshop productions. Champagne said the team is looking for a theater to stage it where it can be fine-tuned for a run at Broadway.

"There should be wide appeal, because Casanova was a very modern sort of man," he said. "He was a man with tremendous talent, resources and energy. The world was pretty much his supermarket, and his greatest problem was finding what to do in life."

From the sound of it, he would have been perfect for the part in "Narcissism Rag."

"Bittersuite" plays at the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, Mondays and Wednesdays at 8 p.m., and Fridays and Saturdays at 10 p.m. Call (818) 762-3143 for information.

Wyma writes regularly for Valley Calendar.