

STAGE REVIEW

'EARLY GIRL' IS AN INSIDE LOOK AT A BAWDY HOUSE

By DAN SULLIVAN,
Times Theater Critic

The "Early Girl," in Caroline Kava's play at the Back Alley Theatre, is the girl who takes care of the pre-5 p.m. trade at Lana's Cathouse somewhere in the desert.

Lana (Morgan Lofting), a dainty woman who favors designer blouses, runs a tight ship. As she tells her girls, there is no room for "surprises" in the sex business. "He decides what he wants and pays for it, in the parlor, *before* you take him to your room."

Lana also stresses refinement and good nutrition and has an incentive system: a special gift to the girl who has sold the most "extras" in the past month. And the prize is not from a Cracker Jack box. We are talking diamond clips and \$400 watches.

Lana's girls are also more or less in bondage, with no access to a phone and only one trip downtown a week—to see the doctor. However, you get what you pay for, and it is possible to make \$20,000 a month at Lana's, after which you can

always quit—can't you?

Fascinating, all this. Playwright Kava has clearly done her research, and we believe the little details of the play: the monogrammed coffee cup given each girl, the timer that keeps each appointment from running too long. It is also convincing, somehow, that we never see the customers. The play isn't about *that*. It's about the girls.

They struck me as less interesting than Lana, who absolutely loves running her little kingdom, and runs it cleverly indeed. She knows the secret of success: Find your metier.

The girls are more conventional, especially when they get dramatic. Jean, the early girl (Lisa Pelikan) has a self-esteem problem and eventually conquers it. This turns out to be the subject of the play, rather to our surprise, since we thought we were focusing on the problems of Lily, the house's latest recruit (Siobhan E. McCafferty). Jean and Lily's voyages to self-discovery involve some Big Speeches that Kava would do well to X-out,

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ROBERT GABRIEL

Actresses Lisa Pelikan, left, Debra Sandlund, Stobhan McCafferty, Morgan Lofting, Kim Lankford.

'GIRL' AIMS TO PLEASE

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and much better acted. Kim Lankford, Debra Sandlund and Tracy Shaffer are very solid here, particularly Lankford. She absolutely won't be rushed, despite director Allan Miller's seeming insistence on a pace. Lankford doesn't have to play out her story to convince us that she has one.

Derek McLane's set makes the point that a well-run house of ill-fame has much in common with a disciplined sorority house, and costumer Meg Gilbert puts the cast in a variety of form-fitting swimsuits and glamorous evening gowns, depending on the time of year. "I just love the start of a new season!" enthuses Lana, when everybody switches to gowns. The

secret of being a good boss is enjoying your trade.

'THE EARLY GIRL'
"The Early Girl" Caroline Kava's play, at the Back Alley Theatre. Director Allan Miller. Producer Laura Zucker. Set Derek McLane. Lighting Ken Lennon. Costumes Meg Gilbert. Sound Reed Woodbury. With Tracy Shaffer, Lisa Pelikan, Stobhan E. McCafferty, Debra Sandlund, Morgan Lofting, Kim Lankford, Denise Gordy. Plays at 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturdays, at 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays. Closes Sept. 27. Tickets \$13.50-\$17.50. 15231 Burbank Blvd. (818) 780-2240.

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