

Past Haunts Victims of 'Victimless Crime'

By MIKE WYMA

The clergywoman and the former prostitute sat on the stage answering questions, and some in the audience had difficulty remembering who was who.

"The girl in the play talked about making \$20,000 a month," one man said to the Rev. Ann Hayman, a Presbyterian minister. "Did you make that much as a prostitute?"

Hayman had never met a prostitute, much less worked as one, before being assigned by her church to run a safe house for women who want to leave the world's oldest profession. Slightly flustered, she passed the question to Norma Ashby, formerly a prostitute and madam of a Sherman Oaks brothel as well.

"It's a little high," Ashby, 52, said of the figure. "It's possible, but you'd really have to work."

The women were taking questions from an audience that had just seen "The Early Girl," a play about prostitutes that is running through Sept. 27 at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys. The theater offers discussions after Thursday night performances, and, this night, about 60 of the 90 or so audience members stayed to take part.

Someone asked whether the characters in author Caroline Kava's play—all alert, attractive women—were typical of real-life prostitutes.

"At this very moment, there are 10 ex-prostitutes in this room," answered Hayman, 38, "and I defy you to pick

them out."

The audience laughed nervously. Very few people looked around.

The women who came with Hayman were graduates and residents of the Mary Magdalene Project, a West San Fernando Valley home for prostitutes who want to start a new life. Although the ex-prostitutes did not identify themselves during the discussion, afterward, a few of them offered their views of the play.

"It was realistic in that the women were upbeat 85% of the time when what's going on is awful and terrible," said a woman with sandy blonde hair. She said she had worked seven years in a massage parlor. "To get through, you

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Morgan Lofting of "The Early Girl," and Norma Ashby, right, discuss prostitution.

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pretend it's OK."

She added that, yes, it was possible to make something approaching \$20,000 a month.

A woman with wispy, bleached hair said she had been disappointed by the play's lack of harshness.

"I wish they'd shown more of the violence," she said. "That's what wasn't real."

The play takes place in the kitchen of a brothel, where the prostitutes gather between tricks. No men are seen. Much of the story concerns the ways in which the madam of the house keeps the women from leaving.

The business is easy to enter and difficult to leave, Ashby said in answer to a question.

"I had a baby and I needed money so desperately I said I'd do it for just six months," she explained. "Then that extended for another six months, and it went on for 20 years."

Ashby said she was in her early 20s when she entered prostitution and that she became a madam in the usual way.

"When you get older, they want someone younger. As that happened, I started introducing younger women I knew to my clientele. It just seemed easier to do that at my house, so I did."

House Raided

In 1979, the house in the hills of Sherman Oaks was raided. Investigators found that Ashby had a relationship with Los Angeles Police Capt. Stephen C. Gates, brother of Police Chief Daryl Gates.

Although the district attorney's office found "no evidence of any criminal conflict" on the part of Stephen Gates, the LAPD suspended him for five days. The department would not publicly disclose the nature of the violation, except to say it involved an "error in judgment."

Ashby, however, said she and the captain had had a sexual relationship, but that Gates "may not have known I was a madam."

In 1980, Ashby served 90 days in jail for pandering, an experience that motivated her to find another line of work. Today, she and her daughter, Laura, run an office-cleaning company, Ashby's White Glove.

Ashby remains active in Catharsis, the self-help group she started in 1984 for prostitutes who want to leave the business. She said the group meets once a week, and is attended by about 25 women.

Both Ashby and Hayman told the theater audience that prostitution is far more common than most people think.

'Behind Closed Doors'

"Street prostitution is only 10% of it," said Hayman. "The rest is going on behind closed doors."

"With AIDS and all the free sex," a woman in the audience asked, "it would seem that the business can't be as lucrative as in the old days."

"It's really not about sex, it's about power," Hayman said. "It's very powerful for a man to buy a woman, it's very powerful for him to have her at his disposal, so there's always going to be prostitution whether there's AIDS or a [Hillside] Strangler or whatever."

Ashby and Hayman agreed that venereal diseases are not a big problem among prostitutes because most have long insisted that customers use condoms. After the discussion, however, Ashby said one member of Catharsis—a woman whose "specialty" was anal intercourse—has tested positive for the acquired immune deficiency syndrome virus.

Hayman told the audience that prostitutes will suffer from the AIDS crisis—not because of the health threat, but because the epidemic has greatly reduced the chances of more liberal prostitution laws.

Hayman and Ashby said a sizable percentage of prostitutes were childhood victims of physical or sexual abuse. The minister, who works mainly with street prostitutes, said the figure approaches 100%. Ashby, more familiar with brothel prostitutes, said perhaps two-thirds have been abused.

"But I wasn't," Ashby told the audience. "I came from a very religious family. Some of my sisters are ministers. I've asked myself, 'How come me as a madam and my sisters are ministers?' I don't know. It just happened."

It was easier for her to explain her difficulty in leaving the profession.

"I'd set financial needs and I'd meet them, but there were always new needs. It's hard to make as much money in the mainstream as you can make as a prostitute."

Hayman said many prostitutes are using their income to support families, which makes quitting difficult. The minister added that often they start as teen-agers and never learn job skills.

There was no shortage of questions from playgoers, and only four left during the half-hour discussion. Laura Zucker, producing director of the Back Alley, said the Thursday post-performance sessions have become a popular feature.

"We started it to bring in audiences on a weeknight, and now we have bigger audiences on Thursdays than on Fridays," Zucker said. She added that the theater always presents someone knowledgeable in the area being treated by the play.

This night, the audience's sympathies clearly were with the prostitutes. Ashby drew considerable applause when she said, "Every

time there's a lady arrested, there should really be two arrests. But there's only one."

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