

# Hype is mightier than the pen in 'Gloria Duplex'

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You'll have a lot of fun at "Gloria Duplex," the new production at the Back Alley Theatre. The problem is you'll have most of it before the play begins.

When you walk into the Van Nuys theater, you are met by a

## REVIEW

startling scene of endearing chaos. The theater — including part of the backstage area — has been transformed into a combination chapel and junk shop. Strings of Christmas-tree lights and tinsel hang from the ceiling. A crucifix-shaped runway — perfect for a fundamentalist Christian fashion show — dominates the floor.

As a Cajun band plays joyful music, and before you can get settled in your seat, Bud (Gregg Henry), one of the characters in the play, leads you on a tour of the "sacred art" that lines the walls. These unusual works include a wall hanging of an angel, which, Bud proudly explains, he constructed utilizing an ironing board and a poster of Marilyn Monroe.

In other words, walk through the door of the theater, and you're thrust into another world — and a slightly off-kilter one at that. You have entered the Kitten Paradise Temple and Lounge of New Orleans, La. — the place where, every night, Gloria Duplex (Brenda Thomson) wriggles her body seductively for the Lord.

It's a wonderful premise for a play, and the set design by Deborah Raymond and Dorian Vernaccio is fantastic. But unfortunately, once this high-energy opening is over with and the play

## THE FACTS

■ **The play:** "Gloria Duplex."

■ **Where:** Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.

■ **When:** 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, 3 and 7:30 p.m. Sunday, indefinitely.

■ **Starring:** Brenda Thomson, Gregg Henry, Rhoda Gemignani and Jean Hubbard Boone.

■ **Behind the scenes:** Written by Rebecca Wells. Directed by Teri Ralston.

■ **Tickets:** \$15.50 to \$19.50. For more information, call (818) 780-2240.

■ **Our rating:** ★★

★★★★ — don't miss it; ★★★ — worth your while; ★★ — has its moments; ★ — if you must; ○ — don't bother.

itself begins, the results are — perhaps inevitably — a letdown.

It would be difficult for any drama to live up to the expectations the pre-show show raises. Rebecca Wells' thin parable doesn't have a prayer.

"Gloria Duplex," which opened in Seattle in 1986, presents us with an evening at the Kitten Paradise, a place "where Saturday night and Sunday morning are combined." There's some clap-your-hands, praise-the-Lord singin' (the lyrics are printed in a program insert, so we can sing along if we like). There is, of course, some preachin'. There is also, in a marvelous bit of incongruity, some dancin' that would rate, if not an X, at least what the movie folks call a hard R.

Wells' point is pure Zen: Opposites are largely a matter of perception. The split between sexuality and spirituality that is so ingrained in Western theology is, she argues, artificial (and proba-

bly harmful). Why, she asks, can't someone be both sensual and holy?

Her argument is that the best way to serve God, beyond loving your fellow human beings, is by finding your own calling, excelling in it, and then utilizing your talent in service of something greater. Gloria does just that. Her talent just happens to be taking

her clothes off on stage.

These are wonderful ideas. The problem is that, once she presents them, Wells fails to develop them dramatically. Rather, she has Gloria and her entourage re-enact the preacher-dancer's life story.

This leads to one sweet scene, in which Gloria has her first date with Bud (the aforementioned artist). But overall, her story isn't

very compelling because the characters aren't well-developed. And it's frustrating, because we'd rather she skip most of this to further explore the implications of her premise.

Teri Ralston's production is quite strong. Thomson is a splendid Gloria. She is funny, full of life and very sexy. Scott Lane designed the great costumes.



Bud (Gregg Henry) serenades Gloria (Brenda Thomson) as Lu (Rhoda Gemignani) looks on in "Gloria Duplex."