



"The Deal," playing at the Back Alley Theater, is the story of FBI agents, tracking crooked politicians in Philadelphia. The play stars Charles Siebert, John M. Jackson and Michael Cavanaugh.

THEATER

The Deal

by Lenore Blossom

"The Deal," Black Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 7:30 p.m. Saturday, and 3 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Sunday. Tickets range from \$15.50 to \$19.50. Play runs until November. Theater is air-conditioned and wheel-chair accessible.

Entrapment, greed, trust and betrayal intricately focus, diffuse and re-focus in playwright Matthew Witten's "The Deal," playing at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys. F.B.I. agents Peter (John M. Jackson) and Alex (Will Nye), wired for sound, are sent to Philadelphia to catch local crooked politicians in the act of extorting money from business developers.

Alex is the boss and, without a conviction in three years, his motivation is clear. He fears being transferred to Alaska unless he traps a minimum of one corrupt Philadelphian. Even though Alex has his eye crooked toward a potentially crooked governor's mansion, he'll throw out the bait and catch what he can: every one a keeper.

Everyone chases his own success, but where does one draw the line? Playwright Witten asks the audience to wrestle with its collective conscience and decide if an honest politician, stymied by red tape and impatience, is a crook when he takes a bribe to

tangled, wired by own conscience, and it is his struggle and eventual decision that gives "The Deal" its courage and heart.

A 32-year-old playwright whose two favorite authors are Dr. Seuss and Elmore Leonard, Witten has written a taut political drama with guts, warmth and humor. His clever manipulation of time and the potentially dry tangibles of the subject matter serves to keep this play moving, a visible page-turner.

The Back Alley offers a first-hand glimpse into the ethics of political surveillance with its traditional Thursday night talk-back sessions, hosting a discussion between audience and experts in the field, and a little insight into the characters.

Directing these characters in Alan Miller, with delicate pacing so important to the expertly balanced script. Imaginative use of a freeze-frame effect, aided by precise lighting from Lawrence Oberman and quality sound by Jerry Sider, showcases director Miller's inventive technique.

The four-member cast is an ensemble of maturity and talent; each actor relishing the depth of character Witten has afforded them. Cavanaugh's Jimmy is achingly vulnerable, bumbling and fumbling with his conscience and his constituency. Cavanaugh is a seasoned pro, winning the audience over the moment he stumbles onstage, with hand out and heart on sleeve.

Jackson, as the tortured intellectual in the wrong job, plays Peter to perfection, gradually

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Bassy Reader

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Everyone chases his own success, but where does one draw the line? Playwright Witten asks the audience to wrestle with its collective conscience and decide if an honest politician, stymied by red tape and impatience, is a crook when he takes a bribe to bring a 15-story hotel, along with hundreds of jobs, to his economically depressed home town. (The hotel being a figment of the F.B.I.'s imagination.)

Live by the letter of the law, like Alex, and yes, Jimmy (Michael Cavanaugh) is dead in the water. Yet, consider this: is deliberately luring Jimmy, as he teeters on the edge of that precipice, entrapment? Alex can't afford a conscience; ice fishing in Alaska doesn't appeal to his family. Alex sends Peter to dangle the hook.

Peter becomes hopelessly en-

tangled, wired by own conscience, and it is his struggle and eventual decision that gives "The Deal" its courage and heart.

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Jackson, as the tortured intellectual in the wrong job, plays Peter to perfection, gradually bringing his audience and himself to the realization that pain and growth are constant companions.

Charles Siebert portrays Tommy, the completely corrupt politician Jimmy could become, with a slickness matched only by the real Tommys of politics. Nye's desperate Alex rounds out the cast. John Ivo Gilles' two-tiered set parallels the two-dimensional thinking of the antagonists; icing on the cake (or grease on the palm) of "The Deal." **ER**

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Y Researcher