

'Duplex' won't go condo

By Charles Marowitz
Herald Examiner theater critic

As you walk into the Back Alley Theater for Rebecca Wells' "Gloria Duplex," you find yourself in a glitzy New Orleans club that calls itself the Kitten Paradise Temple. It is strung with fairy lights and the kind of diaphanous glitter for which sleazy western clubs are notorious. Around the raised platform that serves as the club's stage, you are met by a large, gospel-singing black healer who calls herself Mother Willie May Felix; a redneck rodeo rider who looks like an emigre from Grand Ole Opry, a kimono-clad proprietress named Lu; and an exotic singer and dancer — the eponymous Gloria Duplex.

The company proceeds to deluge you with songs, anecdotes and suppurating Southern hospitality. Very shortly, you learn that the nightclub doubles as a mission, and Gloria Duplex, apart from being an exotic dancer, is also a preacher who claims to have had a vision of Jesus in a mirrored ball. Within this framework, Gloria begins to tell us her story, which, highly condensed, is that she is the offspring of an insensitive "white trash" mother, was seduced by a minister while still at school, fell into the job as exotic dancer, experienced a miraculous vision of Christ, met a bashful cowboy with a weakness for Scripture, and managed to combine her skills as a hoochie-koochie dancer with those of an evangelist to become something like a cross between Gypsy Rose Lee and Aretha Franklin.

I linger on the exterior topography of Rebecca Wells' work mainly because there is no interior to speak of. The cabaret-styled play dotted with arbitrary songs of a gospel and country-and-western nature is a mawkish and sentimental attempt to blend carnality and spirituality that seems to ignore the fact that Jim and Tammy Bakker and Jimmy Swagart have, over the past two years, dramatically demonstrated the crunch of these contradictions.

The evening is severely handicapped by the fact that nothing

asphyxiating banality we begin to suspect that, theatrically speaking, she is very damaged goods and are inclined to hope her bud withers before it ever blossoms.

Wells' attempt to write a play about integration of the opposites that split us so sadly has found neither a narrative nor a set of characters capable of expressing this schism. But, philosophically, it may well be that the schism is what makes life interesting and the desire to unify it, misguided. The music, apart from being banal and sluggishly performed, is entirely gratuitous and in no way furthers the action of the evening — which, of course, it could not do in any case, there being none. The piece lies on the stage of the Back Alley Theater like a beached whale slowly corroding into the sand.

Rhoda Gemignani has the best moments as the club's raunchy proprietress — particularly in the torrid number that opens the second act. Jean Hubbard Boone, who does a passable imitation of Nell Carter, is handicapped by the fact that her character is extraneous to the story and doesn't really belong in the club where it is unfortunately marooned.

Gregg Henry is wan and genial as the biblical cowboy, and Brenda Thomson, as the sanctified exotic dancer, invests a lot of energy in a role that is, unfortunately, the very epitome of diminishing returns. Director Teri Ralston has effectively negotiated the scenes around an imaginative environmental setting by Deborah Raymond and Dorian Vernaccio, but ultimately, to no purpose.

The play originated in Seattle which, in sending us hardy perennials such as "Angry Housewives," is fast becoming for Los Angeles what Los Angeles has long been for New York — a conduit for effluence disguised as masterpieces.

GLORIA DUPLEX: AN EROTIC WORSHIP

SERVICE FOR THEATER, written by Rebecca Wells; directed by Teri Ralston; produced by Laura Zucker; musical direction, Larry Wilkins; vocal direction, Shelley Markum; sets by Deborah Raymond and Dorian Vernaccio; lighting by Lawrence Oberman; costumes by Scott Lane. Presented by the Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys: 8 p.m. Wed.-Sat., 3 and 7:30 p.m. Sun.; through Aug. 13. Tickets \$15.50-\$19.50. Information: (818) 780-2240.

Bud Joseph	Gregg Henry
Lu Gremillion	Rhoda Gemignani
Gloria Duplex	Brenda Thomson
Rev. Mother Felix	Jean Hubbard Boone

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The evening is severely handicapped by the fact that nothing actually happens to its spiritually tormented central character, although a great deal of time is spent telling us about a number of tedious things that are supposed to have happened. All her turmoils are internal, and as a result, the play is devoid of anything resembling dramatic tension. Her bashful cowboy offers no obstacles, nor does the club's proprietor, and the resident black healer is there only to minister to Gloria after her self-induced breakdown. At no time does she rouse either our sympathy or our curiosity, and what for her are great revelations, the realization that "people are not damaged merchandise" but "leaves on a limb getting ready to bud," are insights of such

asphyxiating banality we begin to suspect that, theatrically speaking, she is very damaged goods and are inclined to hope her bud withers before it ever blossoms.

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- Lu Gremlinn Rhoda Gemignani
- Gloria Duplex Brenda Thomson
- Rev. Mother Felix Jean Hubbard Boone
- The Band Eddie Field, John Harvey, Larry Wilkins, Bill Shepherd



In "Gloria Duplex," at the Back Alley Theater, Gregg Henry sings to Brenda Thomson as Rhoda Gernignani looks on.