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# Style

## Good guys finish last in 'Deal'

By F. Kathleen Foley

Somewhere in the middle of "The Deal," you start to get a prickly feeling on the back of the neck, the uncomfortable sensation that someone, somewhere, is watching you.

That's how real and disquieting Matthew Witten's drama is. If Big Brother can batten on even the most well-meaning and unassuming, then, we feel, no one is exempt.

In an era of routine electronic surveillance, mandatory polygraph and drug tests, and massive

government files on individual citizens, it's a point well-taken.

"The Deal," which received its West Coast premiere Sunday at the Back Alley Theater, centers around two FBI agents in the field, a typical fat-cat state politico on the take and an atypically incorrupt local politician who gets caught in the trap of his own momentary weakness and lasting gullibility.

The events play out with the inevitability of Greek tragedy. There are no villains here, just degrees of rationalization.

FBI agent Alex (Will Nye) hasn't had a conviction in three years and is feeling the heat from above. It's a case of bust or be busted. So what if he falsifies evidence in his zeal? That's business. If the large fry continue to elude him, then the small will get tossed into the pot.

The fry don't get much smaller than Jimmy (Michael Cavanaugh), a "virgin" politician who has never accepted a bribe in his

career. Not, that is, until silver-tongued "businessman," Pete, comes along with a seductive proposition.

Pete, actually an undercover FBI agent, is angling for a bigger catch, but when the designated "shark," Tommy (Charles Siebert), wriggles out of the FBI net, the hapless Jimmy takes the fall.

There's a heightened reality to the play. The outside observer — the "wire" artfully concealed in Pete's jacket — is always palpable.

Conversations freeze, then back up to a salient point. Characters step out of the action to comment. Chance comments, incriminating statements, all are taped. The message? Anything you say, even in intimate dialogue with a supposed friend, can and will be used against you.

Until meeting Jimmy, Pete has looked on his undercover work as a "chess game," a battle of wills against the black hats. His guilty realization that he has contributed to a good man's downfall splits his perceptions at the seams. Try as he may, he cannot undo the damage. With his dawn-

ing self-contempt comes self-knowledge.

This is fascinating stuff, and director Allan Miller keeps the action on fast-forward throughout. He couldn't have assembled a better cast. These moving, wholly natural and workmanlike performances should be taped for posterity.

Jerry Sider's sound design, with the echoing clicks and whirrs of the ever-present tape recorder, is integral to the play, as is Lawrence Oberman's well-executed lighting. John Ivo Gilles set is functional, if a bit unimaginative.

A reverse morality play in which those with consciences finish last, and the amoral end up on top, "The Deal" is a telling study in frustration and paranoia.

**THE DEAL**, a contemporary drama by Matthew Witten, directed by Allan Miller, produced by Laura Zucker; set by John Ivo Gilles; lighting by Lawrence Oberman; costumes by Nancy Evans; sound by Jerry Sider. At the Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, Thu-Fri 8 p.m.; Sat. 7:30 p.m.; Sun 3 and 7:30 p.m., through Oct. 29. Tickets: From \$15.50 to \$19.50. Information: (818) 780-2240.

Jimmy..... Michael Cavanaugh  
Pete..... John M. Jackson  
Alex..... Will Nye