

'Voice' tells of radio's golden days

By Clifford Gallo

Woody Allen paid homage to its magical power in "Radio Days." Storyteller Garrison Keillor proved that radio can still cut through the media-saturated airwaves to captivate us in his public radio hit "Prairie Home Companion."

Now, in his nostalgic "The Voice of the Prairie" at the Back Alley Theater, John Olive's ode to

"Prairie" celebrates the flights of fancy that are unleashed when memories and imagination meet head-on.

the early days of radio depicts the moment when the age-old tradition of storytelling was first pushed from the campfire and into the horizon.

Using radio's unique power to conjure up memories once forgotten, Olive re-creates the unbridled optimism that surged through the fledgling radio industry while depicting the recognition given to the gifted few who could, as one character says, "pull ghosts out of the sky."

Constructed so that it glides from the 1890s to the early 1920s, "Prairie" focuses on Davey Quinn (Ronny Cox), a retiring Midwestern hick with a gift for storytelling, who entrances the entire country with his fantastic childhood tales about himself and a spunky blind girl named Frankie. Quinn is greatly aided by a fast-talking New York entrepreneur named Leon Schwab (Barry Gor-



Grizzled Irish storyteller Poppy (Dick O'Neill), left, regales the young Davey (Bobby Zamoski) with a classic tale in "Voice of the Prairie."

don).

"Prairie" celebrates the flights of fancy that are unleashed when memories and imagination meet head-on. Director Bob Clark is best known for his feature film version of "Porky's," but he also directed Jean Shepherd's "A Christmas Story" — another work dealing with nostalgia and memories. Clark gracefully balances the mythic and realistic qualities of the play. (It will be interesting to see how Clark handles "The Voice" when he directs the adaptation later this year.)

Led by Cox's adroit performance as Davey, the middle-aged country boy whose 30-year-old

stories about himself and Frankie charm the nation, the Back Alley's ensemble cast is on the perfect wavelength. Gretchen Corbett's adult Frankie and Dick O'Neill's grizzled Irish Poppy are also noteworthy. Gordon's Leon Schwab is comic, although his New York mannerisms sometimes verge on affectations.

Olive's enchanting "Voice" deserves every audience's full attention.

THE VOICE OF THE PRAIRIE, a play by John Olive, directed by Bob Clark, sets by Don Guber, lights by Lawrence Oberman, presented at the Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. 8 p.m. Thu., 7 p.m. Fri-Sat, 3 & 7:30 p.m. Sun. through May 14. Tickets: \$14.50-\$18.50. Information: (818) 780-2240.