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STAGE REVIEW

The Art of 'The Deal' Is in Its Treatment of Moral Questions

By DAN SULLIVAN, Times Theater Critic

Except that the title has already been taken, Matthew Witten's "The Deal" at the Back Alley Theatre could have been called "The Sting." It traces a small-town FBI set-up that goes awry, and it doesn't end with 19 rounds of gunfire. This is theater, not TV.

Good theater, too. Witten writes tight and sticks to the evidence, rather like his hero, an FBI agent named Peter, not Pete (John M. Jackson). Peter is trying to get the goods on Jimmy, a two-bit ward boss (Michael Cavanaugh). With luck he'll also land Tommy (Charles Siebert), who does favors for people out of the state capitol.

Peter pretends to be representing a developer who needs to be sure there'll be no trouble bringing a new hotel to town. A few drinks with Jimmy establishes his price, and Tommy is also "in." Peter gets the whole deal down on tape, and his boss, Alex (Will Nye), is elated. He hasn't had an arrest in years.

Then the stingers get stung. Never mind how, but Witten gives us a clever scene that shows how a real operator—Tommy—operates. Meanwhile actor Siebert is making an equally important point. Tommy adores being an operator. For him, beating the system is a game. That's why he's so good at it.

That used to be true of Peter, the FBI man, too. But actor Jackson establishes his increasing distaste for this business of tempting people beyond their moral limits. Maybe it's a kind of betrayal. And there's evidence that Jimmy, the small-timer, has never taken a bribe before. Peter doesn't want to be the one to break him in.

"The Deal" doesn't go on and on about Peter's bad conscience, but we're always aware of it, and it makes the evening not just another cop show. It does move quickly, though. Witten makes imaginative use of the device of the tape recorder—scenes that we think are being played for the first time turn out to be on tape, and therefore repeatable.

Director Allan Miller adds a freeze-frame gimmick at the beginning and end of each act and paces the action very briskly. Result: a taut show.



John M. Jackson and Will Nye in Back Alley's "The Deal."

Act I was too taut on Sunday night. Guys making deals left a lot unsaid, even when they don't know there's a tape recorder under somebody's coat, and Witten's dialogue leaves room for the implications of a seemingly innocent phrase to register—"It'll be taken care of." "Are you the guy to see?" etc.

But they won't register if the play is taken at too rapid a clip, as applied for the first hour Sunday. Not until after intermission did Miller's actors settle down to their subtlety, after which they were in—although Cavanaugh could find more color in Jimmy without making him any less the fall guy.

In all, however, Witten's play is a

good deal for audiences who want a clear-cut drama about how unclear-cut life is getting to be these days—how hard it's getting to be to tell the bad guys from the good.

Plays Thursdays and Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays and Sundays at 7:30 p.m., with Sunday matinees at 3 p.m. Closes Oct. 29. Tickets \$15.50 to \$19.50. 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. (818) 780-2240.

'THE DEAL' Matthew Witten's play, at the Back Alley Theatre. Director Allan Miller. Producer Laura Zucker. Set design John Ivo Gilles. Lighting Lawrence Oberman. Costumes Nancy Evans. Sound Jerry Sider. With Michael Cavanaugh, John M. Jackson, Will Nye and Charles Siebert.

Advertisement for the movie 'John Candy' featuring Uncle Buck. The ad includes the title 'JOHN CANDY IS INSTANT LAUGHS!', a quote from Stephen Hunter: 'Uncle Buck' is the kind of movie that so effectively served the star comics of the past, from Chaplin to Jerry Lewis. It is very entertaining, a real showcase role for John Candy!', and another quote from David Ethell: 'John Candy is dandy in his best comedy!'. The ad also features a photo of John Candy in a scene from the movie.

A large advertisement for Pacific Drive-In Features Star, listing various movies and showtimes at multiple theaters including Hollywood Pacific, Paramount, VINE, WESTWOOD, L.A. CULVER CITY, CENTINELA, STUDIO, SOUTH BAY, VERMONT, SAN FERN, NORTHBRIDGE CINEMAS, and TOPANGA. The ad includes movie titles like 'CINEMA DONE', 'HOLLYWOOD PACIFIC', 'PARAMOUNT', 'VINE', 'WESTWOOD', 'L.A. CULVER CITY', 'CENTINELA', 'STUDIO', 'SOUTH BAY', 'VERMONT', 'SAN FERN', 'NORTHBRIDGE CINEMAS', and 'TOPANGA', along with showtimes and ticket prices.