

In review

Fine acting and staging make 'The Deal' a real bargain

By DINA ADLER
Special to The News Chronicle

The strongest aspects of "The Deal," currently at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys, are its fast-paced staging and its excellent actors.

Essentially a modern morality play, "The Deal" presents us with four characters — each with a different capacity to "sell out." Two of the men are FBI agents intent on capturing and bringing to trial a major hoodlum who has been covering his tracks for years. The other two are the hoodlum and an extremely culpable "virgin" bribe-taker who becomes inadvertently involved in the proceedings.

The plot moves swiftly from combination to permutation, until it becomes impossible to distinguish the good guys from the bad ones — probably because there are no good guys by the time the drama ends. Unfortunately, while it is very well written, Matthew Witten's drama often appears to circumvent the very issues that it intends to address.

The issues explored involve what constitutes entrapment, when do the ends justify the means, and how does a man preserve his integrity in the face

of temptation. They are weighty and worthwhile issues which, perhaps by their very nature, defy a pat resolution. Still, the play leaves one longing for at least a few answers and a lot less fence-sitting on the part of the playwright.

Witten appears to want a great deal of sympathy for Jimmy (Michael Cavanaugh), the mayor of a small town who cannot resist a bribe because it will enable his daughter to go to college "with the rich kids." Peter (John M. Jackson), one of the FBI agents who comes to, like Jimmy and who wrestles with his own conscience during the course of the play, is also supposed to be rather sympathetic.

The other two men — Alex, the other agent, and Tommy, the big-time hoodlum — are drawn in blacker strokes and elicit a lot less favorable feeling from a viewer.

We've come a long way from the Greeks and Romans who painted virtue and vice with broad strokes. Witten's drama explores the varying shades of gray that define our current moral landscape.

"The Deal" continues at the Back Alley Theater at 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, through Oct. 29. For more information, call (818) 780-2240.



John M. Jackson, left, Michael Cavanaugh, and Will Nye are out to cut "The Deal."