

Gloria Duplex 6/12/89

THEATRE

by Richard M. Finder

<Open Italics>

GLORIA DUPLEX, Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys 91411 (405 F'wy to Burbank Blvd. Turn right about a block and a half. Allow time for street parking In addition, arrive at least 15 minutes early for the Sacred Art Tour.)  
Wed. through Sat. 8, Sun. 3 & 7:30. \$11.50 to \$15.50 (818) 780-2240.

COMMENTS: "LOW" SATIRE ON SEX, RELIGION, AND  
AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION -- NEW ORLEANS STYLE.

<Close Italics>

The sheer amount of TV evangelizing is awesome, probably the reason the gods created TV satellites. Even those with cable TV can scarcely imagine how much missionizing and testifying is out that all day every day, dwarfing even the number of half-hour promos for 30-days-to-make-a-million-dollars masquerading as programs. You probably watched those lovable Bakkers in "The Jim and Tammy Story", co-starring Jerry "the prayers-of-Jews-are-not-heard" Falwell, and maybe also stuck it out through "Jim and Tammy Part 2: Gary Hart At Sea."

Dr. Gene Scott is still out there 24 hours each day slumbering not, neither doth he sleep. Even Paul Simon, white and Jewish, made it to all the movie channels (and maybe some religious programming services as well) surrounded by black Christians, all singing. I do love Paul Simon, a liberal's liberal (and the only heterosexual white male to make a serious contribution to the blues. I'll have to ask the Reverend Mr. Falwell, who just retired from the Moral Majority, whether the prayers of Paul Simon are heard). All the above may give an idea why Laura Zucker produced Rebecca Wells' "Gloria Duplex: An Erotic Worship Service for Theatre"; there has to be a laugh in all this somewhere.

The playwright herself, after sputtering an admission about what she doesn't know and can't say, does get down to a cogent description of her intent. "I am

interested in, as Flannery O'Connor says, 'the action of grace in territory held mostly by the devil'. I wanted to write a play about integration of the opposites which split us so sadly. Body/soul. male/female, sacred/profane. I was tired of the exhausting separation of nature and grace which leaves us orphaned, addicted, and horny -- not just for sex, but for true intercourse with the divine that is incarnated in this world of beautiful dumb matter." (Of course, the idea of a devil is implicitly dualistic, a tendency in Christianity which began with the quasi-canonization of Aristotle. Christians just don't understand that most other religions just don't have that hang-up, but that's another story, not addressing Ms. Wells' <i angst i>.)

"Gloria Duplex..." is really less a play than a premise. Not a little of the difference between a play and a premise lies in the room left for the actors to improvise. Here the improv appears to an outsider to be a great component; being a member of the band is almost to have a speaking role, and individual instrumentalists are featured. A premise is not a synopsis; the latter can run from a paragraph or two to a couple of dozen pages, and is typically two to six pages. A thumb-nail sketch of a show's story-line is a synopsis. By contrast, a premise can be put in a single sentence, leaving totally open any plot turns. For example, last week's review on "The Phantom of the Opera" at the Ahmanson has been summarized by film fantasist Walt Lee of the classic 1925 silent film as "man born with face like skull haunts catacombs of Paris opera house, kidnaps singer to train her to sing his opera". Obviously, this hardly covers the film's 8500 feet or the Ahmanson's two and a half hours.

Thus, "Gloria Duplex..." is "an unwanted girl grows into a woman who finds fulfillment as a combination erotic dancer and non-denominational evangelist". This <i premise i> leaves out the surprisingly rich characterization or sly humor which, I suspect, the author sketched on paper but which the players (Brenda Thompson, Gregg Henry, Rhoda Gemigniani, Jean Hubbard Boone) and

director Teri Ralston literally fleshed out, in their own images. I feel that in a mystic sense this was less acting than sculpting. Incidentally, I'm familiar with the work of all these folk -- Laura Zucker et al get nothing but the best, and it can't be because they pay that well -- and both Mr. Henry and Ms. Ralston played in shows to which we gave very high honors.

N'Orleans is one of my favorite American cities. The only uninteresting thing about New Orleans "Gloria Duplex..."-style is the recipe for <i crawfish etoufee i>. The recipe lacks sassafras, red pepper, and okra. For the rest, the Back Alley generates the feel, almost the smell, of a dive on Rampart St. (not too far south); no B-girls or hookers, but then, besides being a bar, the Kitten Paradise is also a, well, kind of church.

Gloria, who sees Jesus in when she's dancing and looking into the glitter-ball, fell in love with Bud Joseph, who gave up rodeo after being told by a heavenly voice to become a sacred artist. (He wasn't told <i how i>, which is why you want to arrive early and take the Sacred Art Tour of the Kitten Paradise. "Here's a perfectly good statue of Elvis. Don't know why someone would throw it out," says Bud in puzzled sincerity over a dreadful piece of not-particularly sacred <i kitsch i>, though it may become part of one of Bud's works some day when the spirit is on him.)

One must not overlook the Reverend Mother Willie May(!) Felix, who alternates the gender of her; Christian she may be, but I know N'Orleans gris-gris behind a nominally Christian front when I see it. (I found all three "official" graves of Marie Leveaux, and suspect I know where in New Orleans she's actually buried.) Finally there is good-hearted Lu Gremillion, who gave Gloria her start, and was surely willing to accept Jesus and churchify her restaurant-bar-exotic dance emporium if it will make an honest (or at least legal) dollar. Besides, she is a genuinely good-hearted woman, even if she accepts being called "white trash". Folk in New Orleans have a particular sense

of politeness and graciousness, popularly ascribed to having been Under Three Flags, and their flavors simmer in this theatrical gumbo.

The audience is provided with lyrics to good rollicking hymn-tunes, in its own way standing Garrison Keillor's Prairie Home Companion on its head. Even the audience participation, easy to slip into, turns out to be slyly satirical. However, the Cajun music is a bit thin, as becomes apparent during intermission when Beau Soleil (the album and the group) is played. The fiddler does better on bass guitar; he's no Doug Kershaw.

This is a slightly crazy show, all of it a variations on a theme. Such plot as there is centers on Gloria, and is a psycho-drama; she works out what kinks she has left in her karma.

Cheese and crackers are served at intermission, informality is the rule of the day, and stuffed shirts are not going to enjoy this undoubtedly heretical, schismatic, joyous brand of do-it-yourself Christianity which is, as the author intended, a paean to the pleasure of being alive. "Gloria Duplex: An Erotic Worship Service for Theatre" is the kind of thing Laura Zucker can pull off at the Back Alley without seeming outrageous, pretentious, or trying too hard.

This isn't a great show but it's, a circus for people who have grown bored with circuses. If you've a mind to, take it in such a spirit (holy or otherwise) and enjoy.