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STAGE REVIEW

'Gloria' Delivers Gaudy Gospel Service: But Is It Theater?

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There are several ways to describe "Gloria Duplex" at the Back Alley Theatre. Schizophrenic. Confusing. Rousing. But what is it exactly?

Consider the subtitle: "An Erotic Worship Service for Theatre." Erotic worship service, yes. Whatever happens takes place at Lu Gremillion's paradoxical Kitten Paradise Temple and Lounge in New Orleans. *Temple and Lounge*.

"It's one of the few places I know," says the reverend mother Willie Mae Felix (Jean Hubbard Boone), a sometime participant at the Kitten, "where you can get Saturday night and Sunday morning all rolled into one."

So far so good. But where does the "for theatre" part come into it? Only in those scenes that look back on the life of exotic dancer Gloria Duplex, a troubled woman who, 11 years ago, discovered the face of Jesus in the spinning mirrored ball while doing her thing on the runway at the Kitten Paradise.

That's the short of it.

The long of "Gloria Duplex" involves a convoluted set of divergent strands in search of a play.

They never find it. What we get instead is an evangelical sing-along with flashbacks, a Freudian love story supervised by a benevolent barkeep and surrounded by "sacred art." (Designers Dorian Vernachio and Deborah Raymond have provided the barroom with a runway in the shape of a cross and surrounding walls crowded with oddments of trash brightened by glitter from your nearest neighbor-



Jean Hubbard Boone cradles Brenda Thomson, who plays title role in "Gloria Duplex."

hood craft store.)

And let us not overlook Lu's Paradise Playboys—the snappy four-man Cajun band consisting of Eddie Field (bass and fiddle), John Harvey (percussion), Larry Wilkins (guitar) and Bill Shepherd (Cajun accordion), with Gregg Henry, who plays Budd Joseph, the itinerant rodeo star in love with Gloria, chiming in on the piano.

The story—what there is of it—begins with Gloria Tom Duplex (Brenda Thomson) dropping into the Kitten Paradise and getting hired by Lu (the effusive Rhoda Gemignani) after she gets a sense of the young woman's natural dancing talent. With that name, quips Lu, "They don't know if

you're a girl, a boy or an apartment complex" (an identity crisis afflicting this enterprise as a whole).

She hires the bourbon-loving Gloria who promptly has her first "revelation" when Christ smiles down at her from the mirrored ball above her on the runway.

Budd has his "revelation" the moment he strolls in off the street and sets eyes on the sinewy Gloria. He knows she's the woman for him. It sets him to creating all that strange "sacred art" that's on the walls. But Gloria, an unloved child with rock-bottom self-esteem, can't understand it.

She doesn't see (at first) that Budd wants more than sex. He wants to give and to receive—in short, commitment. Eventually he succeeds in breaking down Gloria's bluff with a dandy speech about leaves on branches and Airstream bodies for souls.

The show's truest religion emerges in these moments of self and mutual revelation. Dramaturgically, they are the most touching and most deft. Writer Wells also has a knack for the evocative turn of phrase ("I think God come to you—you just near-sighted"), even if she doesn't always overcome a certain amount of foot-dragging in the longer speeches—such as the semi-wondrous one about the Chihuahua dog with the power to take away asthma.

Semi-wondrous in fact is a good measure to apply to "Gloria Duplex," which, in the end, is more a gaudy party than a play. Singer/actress Teri Ralston directed, not always to the best effect. The celebration is often forced and often too much of whatever it is.

But when it comes to performers, she's cast the show impeccably.

Everyone here can sing and act but, in a quite subtle way, the actors also have the right look for the roles. Thomson is just weathered enough as the tormented Gloria. You can just about count the pints of bourbon she's helped put away, and temperamentally she seems a short step ahead of a train wreck about to happen.

Henry is the quintessentially understated cowboy with a valiant soul inside and patient heart on his sleeve. Gemignani has the heavy makeup and hearty manner of a knowing mama with a soft center and an armor of solid gold. Her one song-and-dance number is a highlight. As for Boone, our reverend mother gospel singer who helps get the audience frenzied up, she knows how to deliver.

But "Gloria Duplex," the play, doesn't quite. It burdens itself with a meaningless periphery of oddballs planted in the audience (a pregnant nun, a cleric, a Saudi Arabian in shades) that only further dims its own sense of what it may indeed be. Call it a story-tellin' session; call it yet another variation on tall tales of the Deep South; call it a gospel service with scenes. Ultimately, it is neither original nor specific nor satisfying enough to pass for serious nourishment. One leaves the theater wanting both more—and less.

At the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys, Wednesdays through Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 3 and 7:30 p.m. Post-performance discussions Thursdays. Ends Aug. 13. Tickets: \$15.50-\$19.50; (818) 780-2240.