

WESTSIDE/ VALLEY

Play Looks at Radio's Early Days

Writer from Minnesota
awaits breakthrough

By JANICE ARKATOV

The assignment: Write something about storytelling.

That was John Olive's challenge when Minneapolis theater company Art-Reach commissioned him to write a play. The result was 1986's "Voice of the Prairie," which—after more than a dozen regional stagings—wends its way into town this weekend, opening at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys. Bob Clark directs Gretchen Corbett, Ronny Cox, Barry Gordon, John M. Jackson and Dick O'Neill.

"The play is about the early days of radio," Olive said. "This was in the '20s, before radio stations. So in order to sell radios, salesmen would do their own broadcasts. They'd set up this crude sort of broadcast station in the back of a hardware store or some place they were selling radios, and then they'd get the local banjo player or the local crooning cowboy on there—giving people a reason to buy the radio."

In the play, Leon Schwab, a fast-talking New Yorker traveling around the country peddling radios, hooks up with David, a shy farmer with a talent for storytelling. Olive said: "David ends up telling stories about things he'd virtually forgotten—he's in his 40s now—about this wonderful, magical, incredible three-month journey he had when he was 14 with a blind girl



Playwright John Olive, author of "Voice of the Prairie," about early days of radio.

named Frankie.

"You see Davey and Frankie having adventures in the 1890s. Then it jumps back to Leon and David traveling around. David gets more and more popular, starts telling stories on other stations. As a result, he's reunited with Frances, who's a very contained, composed schoolteacher—as opposed to the wild, insane, wonderful girl she was 28 years earlier. Now they have to come to terms with the adults they've become."

For Olive, who was born in Minnesota and is still based there, the storytelling theme was compelling not only thematically but dramatically. "A major thing I see is the difference between when the events are happening—and the way they come out when David's telling the story about it. For example, at one point David says, 'The fire died,' and the fire doesn't die. So you see through it."

Olive is a bit more circumspect in his own revelations. "The closest thing I ever wrote to anything autobiographical was one of my first plays, 'Minnesota Moon,' a one-act about two high school-age kids saying goodbye to each other. One's going off to college the next day, the other's staying home in a small town in Minnesota."

He shrugged. "Really, nothing interesting enough has happened in my life to warrant an entire play."

Olive admitted that personal issues were the genesis for "I'm Standing on My Knees" (which played at the Zephyr Theatre in West Hollywood in 1987), the story of a young poet who believes that her teetering-on-the-edge insanity also feeds her artistry. On the other hand, his latest play, "Killers" (recently produced by Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre) is about a pulp novelist entreated by his fellow tenants to commit a murder. "I can't imagine which issue in my life that might have grown out of," he quipped.

A current issue is his inability to break through to major, high-visibility success—the kind achieved by Lee Blessing ("A Walk in the Woods") and August Wilson ("Fences"), fellow members of the Min-

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