

THEATRE

Forging Ahead

By Norman Kolpas

at the Back Alley Theatre

LIVING IN LOS ANGELES, it's hard sometimes to feel like you're on the cutting edge of theater. This is the land of TV and film. Broadway and off-Broadway seem very far away, especially when their most acclaimed productions can take a year or more to find their way West—if they find their way here at all. That is not to say that we don't get original drama, or even good theater. You can brave the traffic snarls downtown to go to the Mark Taper or the Ahmanson and see fine, innovative theater mixed in among the classics and the safe new plays by name playwrights. You can venture to Hollywood for the L.A. Stage Company or to the L.A. Public Theater on La Cienega, or visit the many small productions that suddenly open and just as quickly vanish in shopfronts along Melrose or Santa Monica.

Or, if you feel like you want something more out of your theater, something challenging and exciting, you can stay right here in the Valley. Down an unassuming alleyway in Van Nuys, The Back Alley Theatre has been taking chances and challenging a small but growing audience since its inception in 1979. Its co-founders, producers and directors, husband and wife team Allan Miller and Laura Zucker, have staged a body of work that rivals the best of off-Broadway and America's regional theaters. Their achievement was recognized by their peers in 1983 when they received a Rockefeller Foundation grant for their innovative work with playwrights and their development of new plays—an honor for which they were nominated by a panel of theater professionals nationwide.

Instrumental to their success has been their Valley venue, though at the start, Laura Zucker and Allan Miller would never have imagined it could be so. Both native New Yorkers, they met at the

Yale School of Drama and moved to Los Angeles in 1975. They bought a house in Sherman Oaks two years later. "I didn't even know what the Valley was," says Zucker. "I thought moving to the Valley was like moving out of town." But with their move Miller also moved his acting classes, which he taught, to the small warehouse space that was to become The Back Alley's home. "We didn't think of opening a theater space," says Zucker. But, while browsing through a bookshop one day, she came across "The Journalists," a little-known and never-produced play by noted British playwright Alan Wesker. With that discovery came The Back Alley's first headlong plunge into theatrical risk-taking—and it hasn't stopped yet.

Besides being complicated and controversial, "The Journalists" was a work of gargantuan proportions, with a cast of 33 characters in a set that represented 16 separate offices at a newspaper. "I was immediately intrigued by its difficulties," Zucker says. "We rounded up everyone we knew who we could talk into doing it. To this day," she says, "people come up to me and say they remember that production and that they have never seen anything like it." Though "The Journalists" ran for only six weeks, it set a high standard that The Back Alley Theatre has striven to match or excel in some 16 productions since 1980.

Not the least of its artistic excellence comes from the quality of the people who appear on The Back Alley's stage. Few of them are "big name" stars. Rather, you'll find some of Hollywood's finest craftsmen, actors and actresses whose faces you'll recognize for the depth and substance they have given to countless television and film productions.

Their appearance here is all the more surprising due to the fact that The Back Alley is an "Equity Waiver" theater, so designated because, when a house has less than 99 seats, the actors' union waives the requirement that its members be paid union scale. But money, Zucker points out, is not why actors take roles at The Back Alley Theatre. "Most of our actors are people who work so much that even if we were paying them full Equity scale, we couldn't compete. These people are making \$3,500 a week doing TV. They do this because when you're just doing TV, it doesn't feed you enough artistically. The people who are the best in this town are the people who stretch and work themselves out."

The Back Alley has also attracted some of the finest new writing talent for the theater. For three years, it sponsored a 200-member Writers' Lab under the direction of Oliver Hailey, an award-winning playwright whose work includes ten full-length plays including "Father's Day," plus television, for which he created "Love, Sidney." Members of this lab ranged from novices to hot young playwrights like Beth Henley (Pulitzer Prize-winner for the 1982 play "Crimes of the Heart") and Ernest Thompson ("On Golden Pond"). The lab also spawned two exciting projects that furthered The Back Alley's reputation for taking chances. In 1982, the theater presented "24 Hours—AM/PM," two evenings of a dozen five-minute plays, with every playlet set at a different hour of the day or night. The following year came "Hot and Cold," made up of a dozen "plays for all seasons," each set in a different month of the year. *Not* your standard theater fare. But, as Zucker stresses, "We only do plays that are new to Los Angeles au-

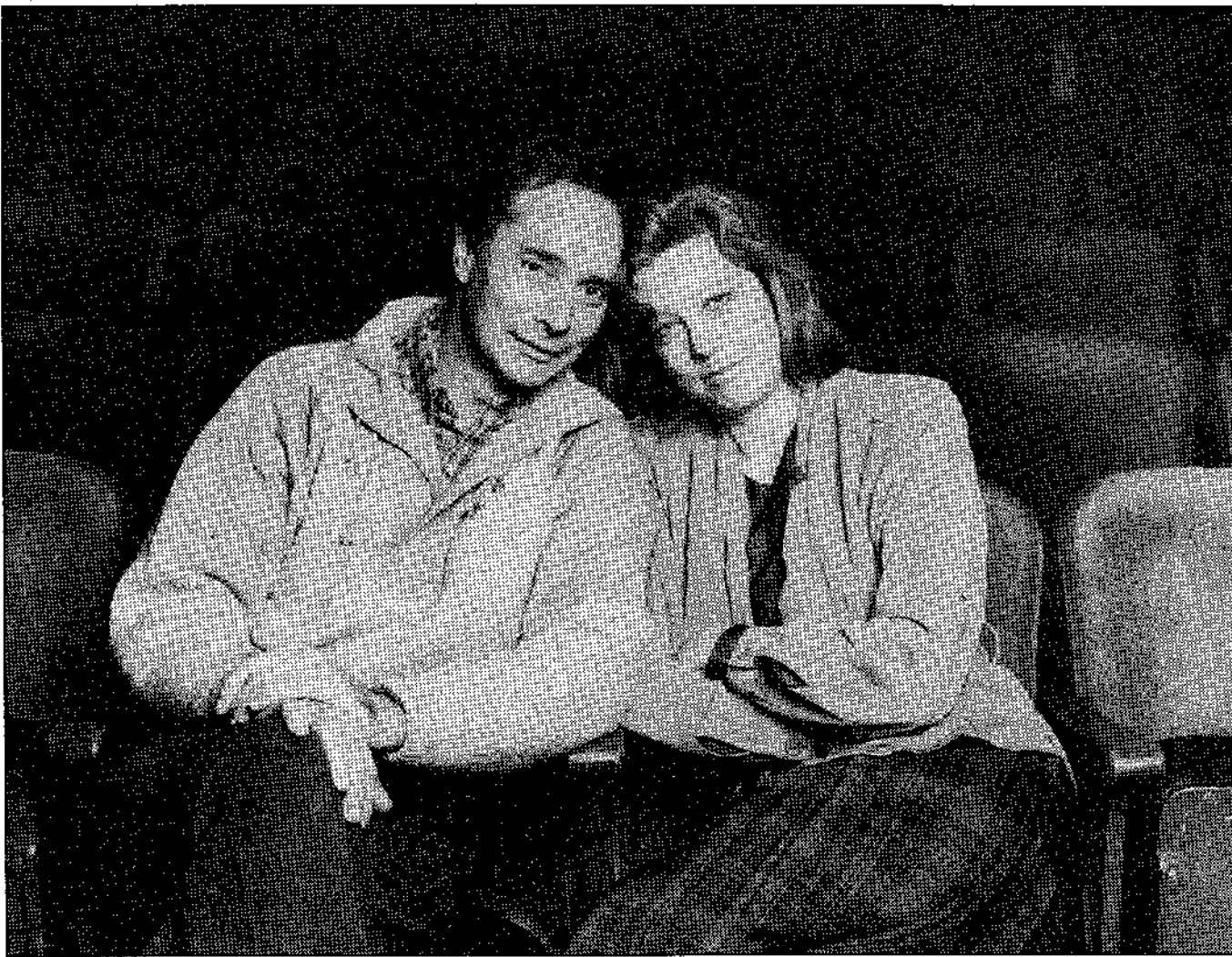


PHOTO • CLAUDIA KUNIN

Husband and wife team, Allan Miller and Laura Zucker found love at the Yale School of Drama and success as the producers and directors of the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys.

diences, or that are new, period—that they can't see anyplace else." And, this commitment to new productions serves The Back Alley's producers, technical staff and performers as much as it does their audiences. "There's one thing that ties together almost all the projects we do here: They have to challenge us, they have to present certain problems that may or may not be solvable. Some of them are, some of them aren't—but trying to solve them is what keeps us interested in them." The Back Alley Theatre's latest productions, just concluded in December, perfectly demonstrate the theater's talent for challenging its audience.

"The Slab Boys" was the West Coast premiere of a 1978 work by Scottish playwright John Byrne. Set in 1957, it takes place in a Scottish carpet factory slab room, where young working-class men at marble slabs mix and grind paint for the factory's designers. It is a wildly funny play, filled with the raucous, often off-

beat humor that offers the only relief its characters have from their monotonous factory lives. Phil McCann, a tough, smart-mouthed, James Dean look-alike, whose mother is in and out of a mental hospital, yearns to study at the Glasgow College of Art. Spanky Farrell, Phil's pal, just grinds away, hoping for a promotion to a designer's desk. Hector McKenzie, a painfully shy mama's boy, has a secret crush on the buxom Lucille Bentley, a design sketcher, and when he lets his secret out, his fellow slab boys champion his cause to pathetically comic results. The Back Alley's production was admirably strong, even with some supporting performances drawn in strokes too broad for Byrne's dark-comic reality. Swept by laughter, the audience felt these characters' pains and hoped with them for escape from the slab boy's life.

Another production that rounded out The Back Alley's recent offerings was a revival of Eric Bentley's "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been," which first

opened in Los Angeles in 1975 and ran for 16 months, becoming the longest-running dramatic play in Los Angeles history. Here, reality could not have been more vivid. Critic and author Bentley took his dialogue from the actual transcripts of hearings before the House Un-American Activities Committee. The characters are real people, including Larry Parks, Ring Lardner, Jr., Sterling Hayden, Jose Ferrer, Abe Burrows, Elia Kazan, Jerome Robbins and Lillian Hellman. And, as Bentley mentions in a brief preamble to the play, "These characters wrote their own lines into the pages of history."

The original Los Angeles production, though it opened some four years before The Back Alley Theatre began, can certainly be viewed as part of this theater's body of work. Miller appeared in the play's first productions at Yale and in New York City. They were relatively unsuccessful and, as Zucker explains, "Allan felt very convinced that he knew how this play needed to be done to work, and con-

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vinced Eric to let us do it out here." With their last \$300, Miller and Zucker optioned for the play and Miller directed its Los Angeles premiere. He gave it a painfully human interpretation, emphasizing the effects of a public inquisition on the individuals involved.

Laughter amid the grim monotony of a Scottish factory. Human dignity and despair under the harsh spotlight of a government hearing. What do these plays have in common that makes them so characteristic of The Back Alley's work? "It's the focus on the human dilemmas, on human issues," says Zucker. These plays tried to reach out and touch the audience with their human focus. Interaction with its audience is essential to The Back Alley's success, Zucker and Miller believe. To that end, the theater has an effective program of community projects. Last year, they distributed more than a thousand free tickets to non-profit community groups for the needy and disabled. The theater also works with local schools like the Kester "magnet" school, offering a slide show, backstage tours, and theater games. "These are our future theatergoers," says Zucker, "and we're glad to be able to do that for school groups."

In the immediate future, patrons will have a wealth of new challenges in store for them. Early this year, the theater will present "The Greeks," its most ambitious project since "The Journalists." Originally written for and produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company, this is a three-part, three-evening, 28-actor adaptation by Kenneth Cavendar of the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. It consists of ten plays that offer a complete, easy-to-follow, vastly entertaining survey of Greek myth and legend. Zucker originally wanted to produce it as her theater's contribution to the Olympic Arts Festival. But, she says, "It was turned down because they said it was too ambitious for us, we couldn't do it. Well, that's like waving a red flag in front of my face! I think we have to get over this idea once and for all. Doing it well has nothing to do with size, budget and resources. It has to do with artistic temperament and artistic ambition.

Beyond that, there will be a production of "Duet for One" by British playwright Tom Kempinski, a touching and troubling drama about a concert violinist who considers suicide after her career is cut short by multiple sclerosis. (Word has it that the play was inspired by the tragic true-life story of cellist Jacqueline DuPre.) In a series of emotion-charged scenes between her and the psychiatrist

who tries to help her learn to live with her debilitating disease, we witness a moving affirmation of art and the role it plays in the human spirit. In its Broadway production several years ago, the play starred Anne Bancroft.

Also planned is a production of "K-2" by Patrick Meyer, a chilling work about two mountaineers marooned on a Himalayan peak and their battle for survival.

Zucker is also on the lookout for a musical. "I'm not talking about 'Camelot,'" she says, "but a play with music." Her search always continues for new exciting plays for The Back Alley. "One of the major problems of this size theater is getting the properties we want to do. There are so many wonderful plays out there that our audiences would love, that we can't get the rights to do because this size house doesn't pay enough royalties."

Just as they have met past challenges, so do Zucker and Miller intend to meet this one. They have already begun to look for a warehouse or historical building in which they hope to open a new, 350-seat Back Alley Theatre in 1986. This space, Zucker believes, will better accommodate the scope of The Back Alley's artistic program and its future ambitions. "What a lot of people who live in the Valley don't realize," she points out, "is that we're two things at once. We are a small neighborhood theater, but we're also a theater that is getting national recognition. There is a psychological factor involved when you know that the work you're doing can go direct from a 93-seat theater to a 900-seat theater. The work has enough validity and impact to go right to Broadway. We *have* to grow into a larger theater."

Zucker is quick to reassure regular theatergoers that quadrupling in size will not make The Back Alley any less intimate—or more costly. "The intimacy of the theater experience is very important to us as well. A 350-seat theater is a small theater. We have to do it in such a way that we can try and keep the prices down."

Aside from space considerations, the search for a new location for The Back Alley has only one other major limitation: it is confined to the ring of hills and mountains that surround Laura Zucker and Allan Miller's home and their theater. "We will ab-so-lute-ly stay in the Valley," says Zucker, stressing every syllable. "You will *not* get us out of the Valley. We *are* the Valley's theater. That's how we perceive ourselves." And the Valley, and The Back Alley Theatre, both benefit from that perception. **WM**