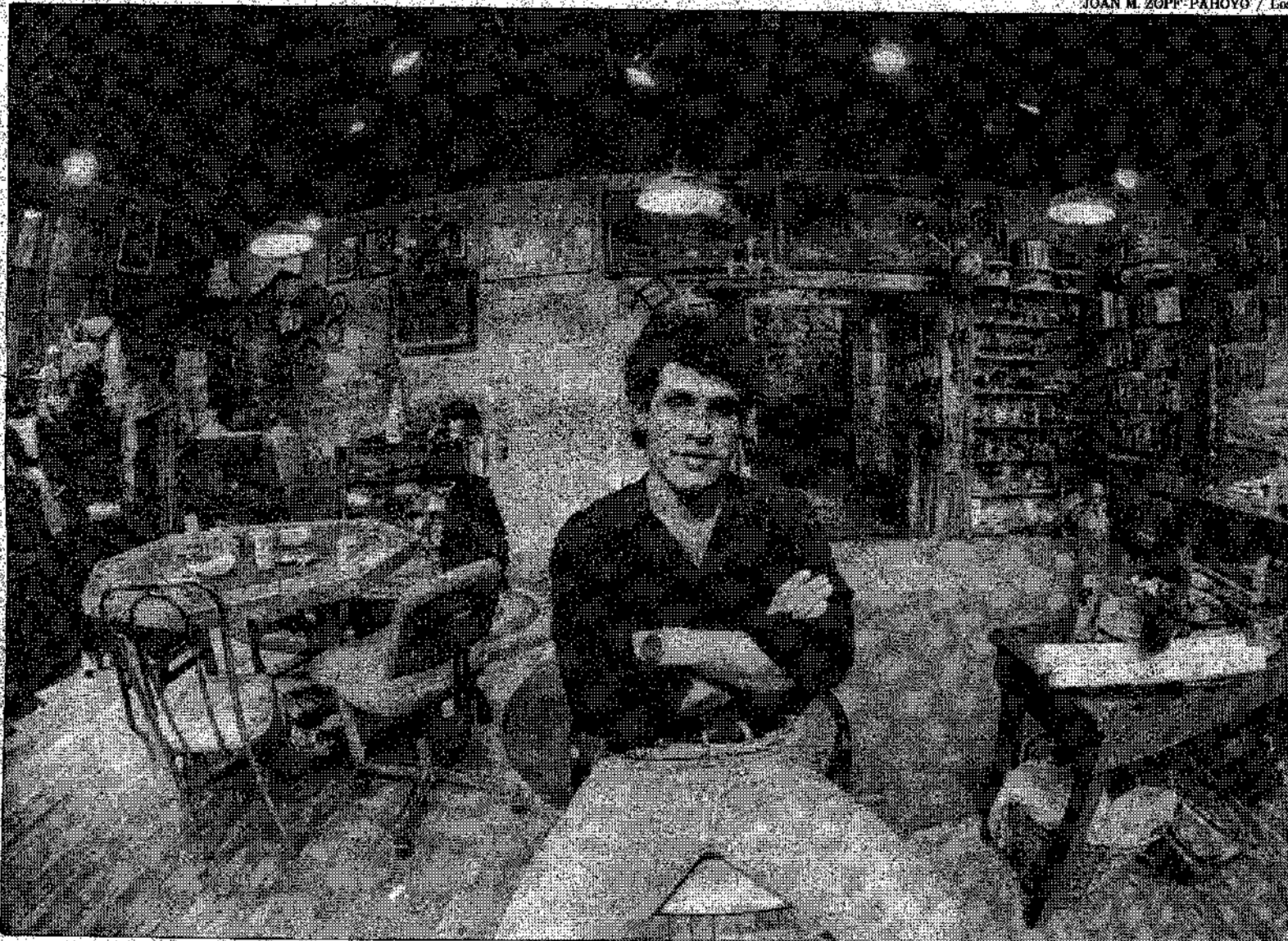


# VALLEY CALENDAR

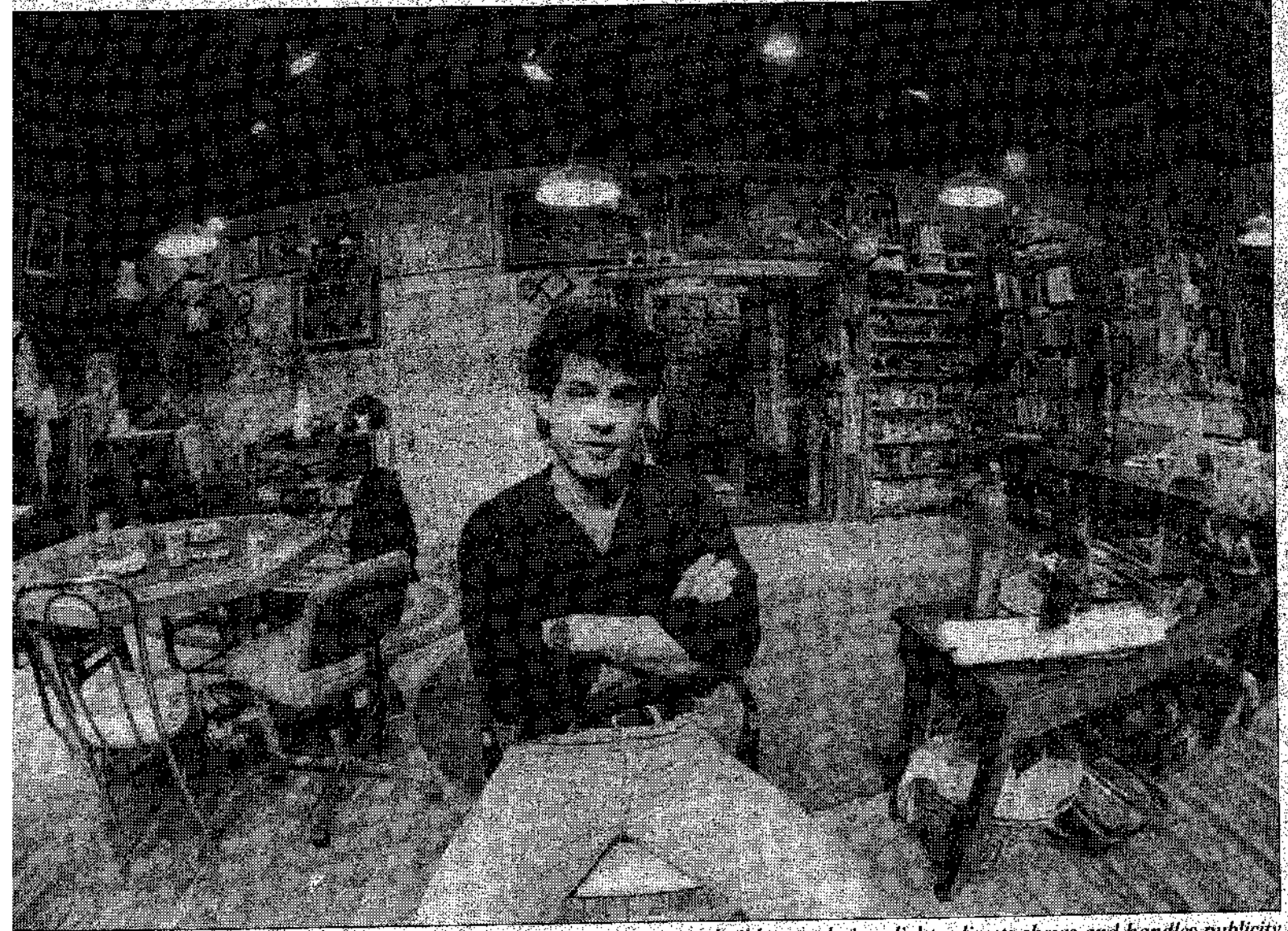
JOAN M. ZOFF-PAHOYO / Los



# VALLEY CALENDAR

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JOAN M. ZOPP-PALOYO / Los Angeles Times



*our started Gnu Theatre from the ground up in 1985. He still hires actors, builds sets, designs lights, directs shows and handles publicity.*

## High Drama in the Valley

# Are Patrons Getting Enough New, Challenging Plays in Local Theater?

By JANICE ARKATOV

**O**n any given night, there are perhaps a hundred theater events to choose from in Los Angeles—a good share of them in the San Fernando Valley. Many of the Valley houses are prosperous. But does that mean they're *healthy*? Is the work new, important, thoughtful, challenging?

It depends on the theater, the artistic director—and his or her audience. From Van Nuys to Burbank to North Hollywood to Woodland Hills, the creative, financial and qualitative scope of Valley theater is a wide one.

In the past, community theater (composed of non-professionals) was standard. Now, most of the work is Equity Waiver. Many of the theaters are rented by outside producers—with an occasional co-production by the landlord and a visiting artist. Some are membership companies. Of those, the longest standing are Studio City's Theatre West (established in 1962), North Hollywood's Group Repertory (1973) and Sherman Oaks Actors Alley (1973).

"We do everything ourselves," said Group Rep's Lonnie Chapman, whose 99-seat theater has a subscription audience of 350, a mailing list of 5,000 and an annual budget of \$62,500. Although he relies on revivals in his five productions per year, Chapman's real interest is in creating new work. The company includes 12 directors, 115 actors and 21 playwrights—from whom Chapman has chosen his current repertory: Doug Haverty's musical "Roleplay" and Robert Ellis' Czechoslovakia-set "Perestroika."

One of the company's biggest obstacles has been surviving a move that took place six years ago. "We lost almost all our subscriptions," lamented Chapman (whose attendance fluctuates from show to show, depending on reviews and word of mouth). "We're just now getting back to where we were." The average age of his audience is 40, he estimated, with a 70-30 split favoring Valley residents.

"I'm not happy with the status quo—certainly not," he declared of the quality of theater around him. "But I think that will change. It's the responsibility of the artistic people not to say, 'Will this do well?' but 'Is this something that illuminates the human condition?'"



TORU KAWANA / Los Angeles Times



Laura Zucker, above, is co-producing director of the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys, and Gary Blumsack is artistic director at the 99-seat Burbank Theatre Guild.

average capacity of 65% (children's theater, however, always the house). Marney listed "Irene and Other Songs" and Bill "Freedom of the City" as the best received work.

The company lists 250 members, 25 writers, 25 directors, 100 professional musical and technical personnel and an average of 10 productions—at about \$8,000 each—per year to get to a point where we can operate on a regular basis, rather than have the money to produce. I do think audiences are lost when there are too many celebrities. Also, so much in our society is celebrity worship. A show can't be without a name in it. And that's unfortunate."

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At Theatre West, managing director Doug presides over 186 seats and a mailing list of figures that most people in his audience are "from the Valley, West Hollywood and Hollywood."

"We tend to do kind of experimental stuff," he says that's bound not to get an older audience." Play 62-member company of "vibrant young people shortage of more mature actors; bona fide lead the 40 to 45 year-old range." With an annual budget (\$6,000 to 7,000 is the average per theater has a 5,000-person mailing list and an audience, a cross-section of professional and lower-echelon Yuppies." Attendance vacillate 50% to 90% capacity.

Planning a season of six productions, Morris currently presenting George Bernard Shaw's "Houses") already has an impression of theater "in a town dedicated to film and television. Ninety percent of the people who do theater don't theater," he said sadly, "but as an audition piece TV show."

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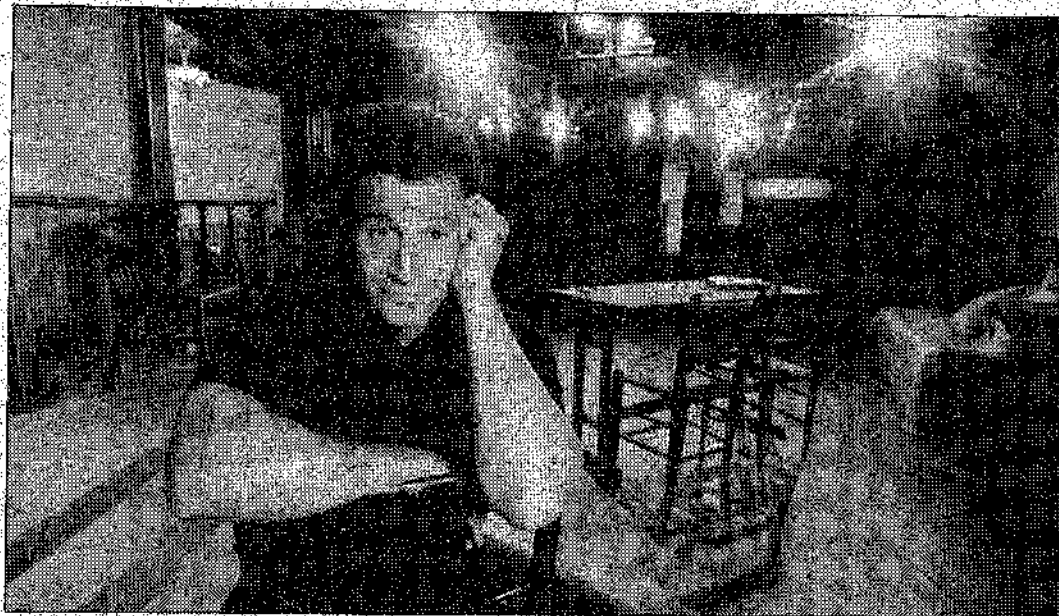
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average capacity of 65% (their children's theater, however, always packs the house). Marney listed "Betty Garrett and Other Songs" and Brian Friel's "Freedom of the City" as the theater's best-received work.

The company lists 250 members (125 actors, 25 writers, 25 directors and the rest musical and technical people) and an average of 10 productions—budgeted at about \$8,000 each—per year. "I'd like to get to a point where we can produce on a regular basis, rather than when we have the money to produce," Marney said. "I do think audiences are growing. But sometimes audience support gets lost when there are too many theaters. Also, so much in our society is tied into celebrity worship. A show can't do well without a 'name' in it. And I think that's unfortunate."

Playwright-director Jeremiah Morris is the new artistic director at 65-seat Actors Alley, where he's inherited a

At Theatre West, managing director Doug Marney presides over 186 seats and a mailing list of 3,000. He figures that most people in his audience are "Yuppies from the Valley, West Hollywood and Hollywood."

"We tend to do kind of experimental stuff," he said, "and that's bound not to get an older audience." Playing to an 62-member company of "vibrant young people—but a shortage of more mature actors, bona fide leading men in the 40 to 45 year-old range." With an annual \$125,000 budget (\$6,000 to 7,000 is the average per show), the theater has a 5,000-person mailing list and an "over-30 audience, a cross-section of professional people and lower-echelon Yuppies." Attendance vacillates between 50% to 90% capacity.

Planning a season of six productions, Morris (who's currently presenting George Bernard Shaw's "Widowers' Houses") already has an impression of theater's position "in a town dedicated to film and television. Ninety-eight percent of the people who do theater don't do it for theater," he said sadly, "but as an audition piece for some TV show."

Morris—who also oversees Actors Alley's improv group,

Please see THEATER, Page 23

# THEATER: Most Productions in Valley Are Equity-Waived

Continued from Page 22

the Alley Oops, and a "living newspaper project" (which dramatizes news stories) with Cal State Northridge—isn't shy about voicing his complaints. "Everybody wants to act, but nobody wants to put up sets," he said. Neither is he fond of the audience makeup. "We've got a problem. We don't have minorities—blacks, Hispanics, Asians; we do not have an inner-city audience. I also want to build an audience with hearing-impaired in the Valley. But it's hard."

One thing that no one's worrying about is the presence of women. The roster of females at the helm includes Laura Zucker, co-producing director (with Allan Miller) of Van Nuys' Back Alley Theatre; Maria Gobetti, co-artistic director (with Tom Ormeny) of Burbank's Victory Theatre; artistic director Cynthia Baer Wynant of the Richard Basehart Theatre in Woodland Hills, and managing director Alicia O'Connor of the Donald O'Connor's Family Theatre (formerly the Snow Place) in Studio City.

With 93 seats and a mailing list of 18,000, the 10-year old Back Alley is one of the most respected theaters in Los Angeles.

Among its more than 30 productions, its hits have included "The Fox," "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?" "In the Sweet Bye and Bye," "What's Wrong With This Picture?," "Walk on the Wild Side" and the recent "Voice of the Prairie." Said Zucker: "We're increasingly interested in pieces that involve music; we've been averaging one a year. I think there's a great need to develop small musicals. But it takes more money." (Her annual budget is \$350,000.)

On the subject of money, Zucker—who's been one of the producers most vociferously involved in the ongoing negotiations with Actors Equity—gets downright glum.

"We have a hit show. But with the new 99-Seat Plan," she noted, referring to Equity's stipulation that 30% of the box office take go to the actors, "I can't pay the rent. I mean, I can pay it, but it's hard. For an ongoing institution, that becomes a real problem." Zucker points to the recent closings of two Valley theaters—the Megaw and Room for Theatre. "The financial

scribed the one with her own patrons as a healthy "tug of war."

"It's like you're on one end of the rope and they're on the other, each pulling the other in the direction you want to go," she said. "Yes, we had a big success with 'What's Wrong With This Picture?'—a Jewish play. Yet 'Sand Mountain' was definitely not a Jewish play. A lot of our audiences tend to be Jewish, as they are across the county. But if you're only giving people what they want to see and are used to seeing, why bother?"

"No, you don't want to go so far out that no one comes. But you've got to stretch. Sometimes you guess right, sometimes you're wrong. Sometimes you feel brave. I wish we could afford to be braver."

The 9-year old Victory Theatre, (which recently completed a premiere run of David Higgins' "Bonus Baby") also has a reputation for favoring new work, including John Kostmayer's "On the Money" and "The History of Fear" and John Ford Noonan's "Talking Things Over with Chekhov."

"We choose to do original material by American playwrights—exhibiting our taste and hoping people will like it," said Maria Gobetti, who also teaches three acting classes at the theater. "Yes, we have to stay in business—but we're not going to do sure-fire theater."

With two theater spaces (99 and 48 seats), an annual budget of \$180,000 divided between three main-stage productions and two small-stage ones, and a mailing list of 16,000 (she's in the process of paring it down), Gobetti sees her audiences "as the same people—age-wise, and everything else-wise—who go to theater all over the city. They come from the Valley, Hollywood, the Westside, Toluca Lake, Glendale, Encino, but not a lot from Burbank."

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Still, Zucker has no intention of giving up—or moving her business to a more fashionable setting. "The point is, everyone's doing it on Melrose," she said, laughing. "We live here, we work here. When we first decided to open in the Valley, everyone said, 'You're crazy. Now they say, 'You're so smart.'"

She sees no difference between her patrons and those in Hollywood. "Our audiences tend to be older—but that's true across the United States. Everyone's audience is tipped towards the over-40. Still, we are looking for plays that would interest a younger audience." Zucker, who believes that it takes three to five years to develop a

scribed the one with her own patrons as a healthy "tug of war."

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On the other hand, Cynthia Baer Wynant of the Richard Basehart Theatre (which rented at the West End for two years before establishing its new home in January, 1988,) feels that her audience is very local, drawing well from Northridge and Sherman Oaks.

"A lot of people don't want to go over the hill, leave the Valley at night," she pointed out. And they want to be home—in bed—by 10 p.m. We do get some young people from Pierce or CSUN or young marrieds with children. But our main audience is the older group." (There is a mailing list of 2,000, but so far only 100 subscription sales.)

Sixty actors, writers and directors make up the company—with "charter members" such as Angie Dickinson, Shirley Jones and Shaun Cassidy swelling the celebrity ranks. David Doyle of "Charlie's Angeles" was a draw last year in A.R. Gurney Jr.'s "The Perfect Party." (Other first-year fare included "Little Mary Sunshine" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream.")

If it isn't the most adventurous fare, Wynant—whose per-production budgets average \$12,000—has no apologies: "I don't think we have people coming here who endlessly want to see new things. Perhaps they'll try something new, but they want to be comfortable. So maybe we'll do new things one or two times a year... but no more."

The O'Connor Theatre's Alicia O'Connor (who was featured last March in the 68-seat theater's debut production of "Charley's Aunt" with her father, Donald) is finding herself in the same boat—with some reluctance. "Dad really wants us to do the standards," she noted. "I want to do plays with meat on them—not avant garde, but things that'll make people think. The one I want to do next has Asians, whites and blacks. At the end of the year I want to have as many people showcased as I can."

With such a short track record, O'Connor is not quite sure of who makes up her audience, where they come from or if they'll be back.

"Charley's Aunt" did extremely well—but the \$50,000 that came from it has already disappeared into back-payments and production costs for her last show, Robert Morse's staging of "I Do! I Do!" O'Connor inherited the Show Place's 500-person subscription list but has found signing them up slow so far. "On our first show, we didn't have a lot of discounts," she explained. "And a lot of our audience are seniors. Now we have those discounts in place—for seniors, students, groups."

Another relative newcomer to the Valley scene is Ed Gaynes, who took over artistic directorship of the 5-year-old, 84-seat West End Playhouse in Van Nuys on Jan. 1 of this year. "It's hard for Equity Waiver to get any visibility," he said with a sigh. "A lot of people

doing some plays. It's a constant struggle, though. You don't go into this to make money. You do it to give life to new projects."

For some, it means starting from the ground up. In 1985, Jeff Seymour renovated a deli on Magnolia Boulevard in North Hollywood and turned it into the Gnu Theatre. Since then, Gnu premieres include Bill Barker's "Best Wishes," John Ford Noonan's "Spanish Confusion" and Rafael Lima's "El Salvador"—which was awarded outstanding writing, directing and production honors at the 1989 Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Awards. He is preparing Barbara Bishop's "Siblings," which opens in June.

In-house work is one of the Gnu's secrets of success. On a \$5,000 budget ("often less") Seymour—who lives next door to the theater—hires the actors, builds the sets, designs the lights, directs the shows, handles publicity, and often seats patrons. He also teaches acting classes at the theater.

"Since we started, the audience and box office have grown wonderfully—with little variance," he said. "I attribute it mostly to the shows doing well critically. People hear about them, they tell others. If you have any competence, you tend to get better. Then you get more press and it keeps building."

As for audience makeup, Seymour, who has a mailing list of 4,500 for the 50-seat house, says "mostly over-35, white-collar, college graduates." Half come from the Valley, none from the 213 code. "But there's no distinction between the Valley and

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Predecessor Michael Bell "was doing classy comedies: British, French; there's an audience really in tune with that." With a mailing list of 5,000 (and no specific number of productions planned per year) Gaynes notices "no problem with people crossing over the hill to come here. It's a very loyal audience. But I want to branch out. I'm talking to Joan Darling about



theater. Aside from the geographic location and a slightly different image, humans are the same."

At the 99-seat Burbank Theatre Guild (in its community theater days, the Burbank Little Theatre), artistic director Gary Blumsack is also attracting a varied crowd.

"A lot of people come from the east side of the hills in Hollywood," said Blumsack, who's run the theater for two years. "We've also got a lot of studio people; it's a heavily traveled industry house. We're five minutes from Warner Brothers, Columbia, the Burbank Studios, Orion. People also come from Van Nuys, Sherman Oaks, Encino, Glendale. We don't tend to pull a lot from Burbank; it's still a very

conservative town. But the city of Burbank has been terrific. They gave us this building" rent-free.

He has also recognized the value of a celebrity cast. "I called in my markers, got all my friends with series to come." Although that has led to successful revivals ("Wait Until Dark" with Doug McClure and Greg Mullavey in 1986), Blumsack is looking forward with more excitement to his upcoming premieres: Lee Blessing's "Independence" and a play by Dana Coen, whose "Sympathy" ran at the theater in 1988. "I'm looking for original work," Blumsack said, "and hoping it'll translate into film. Hey, it worked for Joe Papp."

In spite of the aches and pains—

financial and otherwise—of running a small theater, there is little indication that producers are becoming fatally discouraged. Of course, only a handful (the Back Alley, Group Rep, the Victory, Burbank Theatre Guild and the Gnu) have budgets that include advertising—and then usually on a limited basis. "I'm not a great believer in spending too much on ads," said Gaynes. "Too costly," said Wynant. "We don't have the money," Marney said bluntly.

The producers are considerably warmer when it comes to evaluating each other's work—though the opportunities to sample it are admittedly scarce. Morris, who says, "I've seen some very exciting theater and some very bad theater," ranks the Back Alley, Group Rep and Theatre West as his picks. Chapman also cited the Back Alley

and Theatre West. O'Connor picked Theatre West and the Chamber (generally a rental), Blumsack the Victory, Back Alley and Gnu. Gobetti picked the Back Alley—"and I like our stuff too."

At a time when VCRs and cable have made stay-at-home entertainment an easy alternative to the rigors of theatergoing, these producers (and their Westside counterparts) find themselves in a common boat: vying for good work and for larger audiences. If theatergoing has not been a priority of Valley residents in the past, these producers are determined to steer a new course. "I've seen only an increase in patrons," Blumsack said firmly. "L.A. theater is growing up; we're not the poor relation anymore. And we're not going away."

*Arkatov writes regularly about theater for Calendar.*