

ARTS

& ENTERTAINMENT

Lamenting in-Equity of the Valley

LORE VALESKO/DAILY NEWS

Related story on Page 15.

By TOM JACOBS
Daily News Theater Writer

Valley residents like to think all of their leisure-time needs can be taken care of right here.

There are fine restaurants, specialty shops and multiplex cinemas. The Valley also boasts its own metaphysical bookstores, street gangs and massage parlors.

There is just about everything, except a major, legitimate theater.

Yes, there are many 99-seat Equity-waiver houses — more than 20 at last count. There is also dinner theater and student and community fare.

But to see fully professional Equity theater, one has no choice but to go over the hill.

The latest attempt to open such a theater locally collapsed last month when the operators of the Excabbur were evicted from the former Woodland Hills cinema they had hoped to turn into a legitimate facility. Season ticketholders were left with worthless passes to a nonexistent theater, and the city began a fraud investigation.

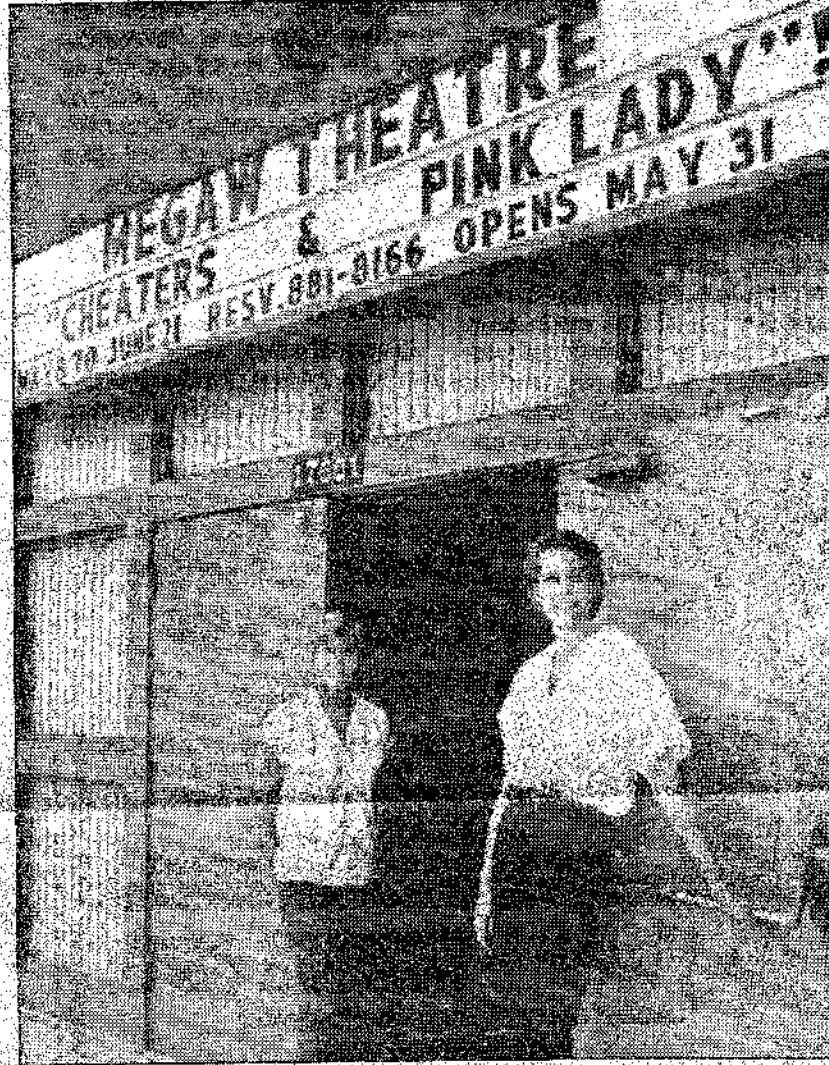
Earlier this month, the operators of the Megaw, the Valley's first Equity-waiver theater (and still the only one west of Sepulveda), decided to close the facility after 14 years. They tried, and failed, to move up to full-Equity status four years ago, and according to the theater's operators, they have now gotten tired of running a small-scale, small-budget facility.

These are discouraging signs, to be sure, but at the same time:

■ The Back Alley Theatre is continuing to negotiate purchase of the former Van Nuys Post Office, which would be turned into a 300-seat theater.

■ Actors Alley Repertory Theatre in Sherman Oaks has adopted a five-year plan that calls for the space to become the Valley's regional repertory theater.

■ Though it hasn't done such detailed planning, Room for Theatre in Studio City hopes to move up to



Megaw Theatre owners Sydney Mae Morrison, left, and Elaine Moe.

Equity-waiver theaters are usually run on a soft-shoe string. Actors' Alley artistic director Jordan Charney noted with pride that the 14-year-old theater just installed air conditioning, which he called a "major expense."

The top executives of such facilities "are lucky if they make \$100 a week," he said. Room for Theatre's Walden said her salary is "zero at the moment. We've never been able to make anything remotely near a living wage."

If operators of such facilities are going to move to major-theater status, they need start-up help — such as

in 14 years of operations — and that was for "a program that we developed that offered free performances for senior citizens." And that had to be matched with lost money.

Adding the Valley particularly, Zucker said. Training business to recognize the importance of the arts "is going to be a very long educational process," she said.

Moe noted that the Megaw's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to move up to a larger theater was largely financed by "a Northern California company that believed in our project." When that company

might also have given the theatergoer an unreal notion of the real cost of putting on a play.

Zucker, however, disagreed with that interpretation. She notes top tickets for the Back Alley rent show, "Jacques Brel I and Well and Living in Paris" for \$17.50 — high by waiver standards but not high enough to show from becoming a major show. (In contrast, tickets for "Shu Me," starring Pam Dawber at the Ahmanson Theatre, are as high as \$36.)

"We've had no resistance to the rise in ticket prices," she said. "People are willing to pay a certain level of work."

"When you do your audience surveys, theatergoers tend to be content. Price is not the primary factor in deciding whether to show."

In any event, Moe and Morrison this year decided enough was enough. "We're very proud of what we've accomplished," Moe said. "(But) we're going to go live desert for a while, enjoy the cactus and watch the cactus grow."

Morrison figured the two put approximately \$85,000 of their own money into the theater over the years. "We can't continue to subsidize theater out of our own pockets," she said. "People should take these small theaters for what they are: Equity-waiver is a love."

The Back Alley's Zucker issued a similar warning.

"You get tired of tickle-ting it," she said. "People do not move on. I just move on when my days will be numbered." "There are an increasing number of people (in Equity) who feel that way. How do you ask people whose talent is not respected to work for nothing?"

Meanwhile, Herb Rogge, producer of the La Mirada Theatre, recently that he is still worried on the status of the former Excabbur facility. Owner Harlan is negotiating the sale of the building to Bank America Real Estate.

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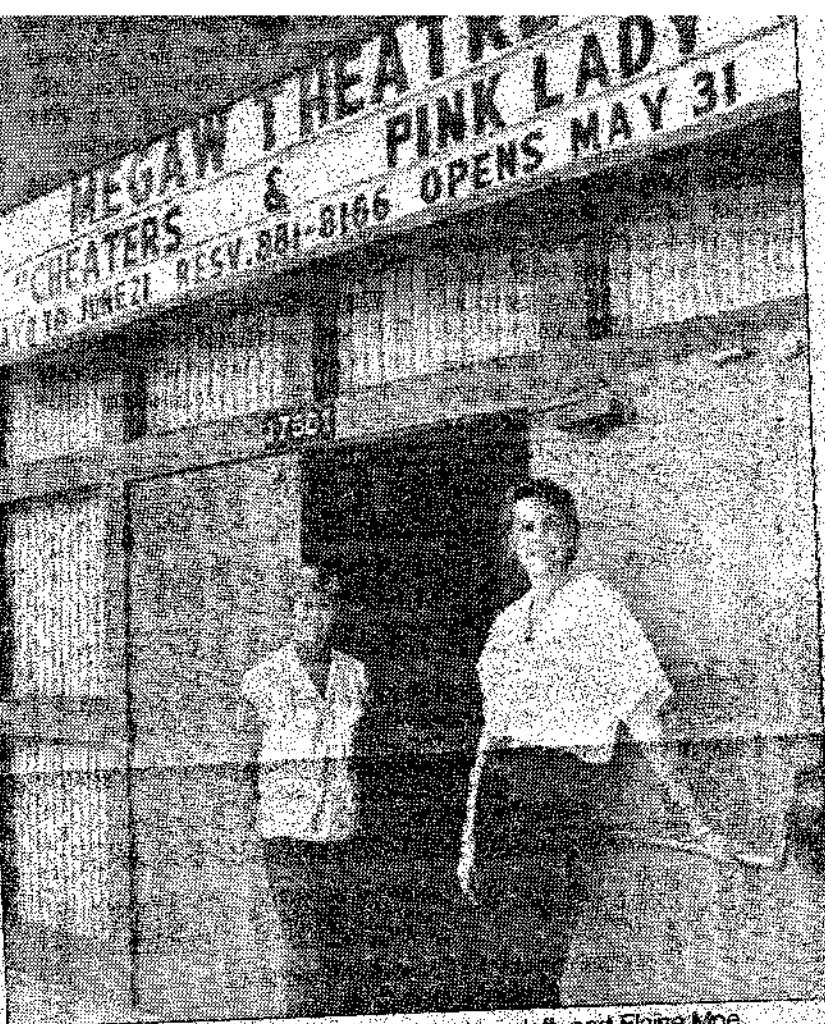
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ren actively looking for spaces
West Valley where he can
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ic definitions are in order. Equi-
waiver theaters are those where
ctors are paid little or nothing,
he seating is limited to 99 peo-
At full-Equity theaters such as
Mark Taper Forum or South
t Repertory, all actors are paid
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tioning, which he called a "major
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The top executives of such facili-
ties "are lucky if they draw \$30 a
week," according to Megaw artistic
director Elaine Moe. Room for The-
atre's Walden said her salary is
"zero at the moment. We've never
been able to make anything remote-
ly near a living wage."

If operators of such facilities are
going to move to major-theater sta-
tus, some start-up help — such as
the considerable assistance the Los
Angeles Theatre Center has re-
ceived from the city's Community
Redevelopment Agency — seems
essential. Even the La Mirada the-
ater is housed in a city-owned and
-operated facility.

But, local theater operators com-
plain, little help is available to them
from any level of government.

"The city and county of Los An-
geles and the state are all lagging
dreadfully behind other states in
their support of the arts," said Back
Alley producing director Laura
Zucker. "It's a disgrace."

Moe said her theater has received
a grant total of \$2,500 from the city

in 14 years of operations — and
that was for "a program that we de-
veloped that offered free perfor-
mances for senior citizens." And
that had to be matched with local
money.

Adding to this problem, "there's
not a tradition of giving by corpora-
tions — in the Valley particularly,"
Zucker said. Training business to
recognize the importance of the arts
"is going to be a very long educa-
tional process," she said.

Moe noted that the Megaw's ulti-
mately unsuccessful attempt to
move up to a larger theater was
largely financed by "a Northern
California company that believed in
our project." When that company
suffered some financial setbacks
and was forced to pull out, there
was no one else to fall back on, and
the project collapsed, she said.

Moe and Megaw producer Syd-
ney Mae Morrison pushed on for
two more seasons. Then, two years
ago, they raised their five-play sub-
scription price from \$45 to \$50, or
\$1 per show. They lost 450 sub-
scribers.

"That was a tremendous shock,"
Moe said. It was also the beginning
of the end. She admitted that, while
Equity-waiver has whetted the audi-
ence's appetite for
professional-quality theater, a

Zucker, however, argued
that interpretation. She noted that
top tickets for the Back Alley's cur-
rent show, "Jacques Brel Is Alive
and Well and Living in Paris," are
\$17.50 — high by waiver standards,
but not high enough to stop the
show from becoming a major hit.
(In contrast, tickets for "She Loves
Me," starring Pam Dawber at the
Ahmanson Theatre, are as much as
\$36.)

"We've had no resistance at all to
the rise in ticket prices," Zucker
said. "People are willing to pay for a
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ed. Equity-waiver is a labor of
love."

The Back Alley's Zucker sounded
a similar warning.

"You get tired of a dark and dim-
ing it," she said. "People do want to
move on. I understand completely
what (Moe and Morrison) are do-
ing."

"If our plans to move don't pan
out, our days will be numbered,"
she said. "There are an increasing
number of people (in Equity-waiv-
er) who feel that way. How long can
you ask people whose talent you re-
spect to work for nothing?"

Meanwhile, Herb Rogers, pro-
ducer of the La Mirada theater, said
recently that he is still awaiting
word on the status of the former Ex-
calibur facility. Owner Harry Selvin
is negotiating the sale of the build-
ing to BankAmerica Realty Invest-
ors.

Rogers said he likes both the facil-
ity and its Mulholland Drive loca-
tion. He hopes to start negotiating a
lease on the building once its owner-
ship is clarified.

So the Excalibur might yet open
as a theater (although certainly with
a different name). Even so, the for-
mer operators' failure has probably
hurt the others' efforts to build a
major theater here.

"I'm very sorry about the Excali-
bur," Charney said. "I prayed that
they either didn't do it or were very
successful. When a theater tries and
fails, it's bad for everyone."