

# Little Theaters Steal the Spotlight as Reviews Shine, Audiences Grow

By ALLAN JALON, *Times Staff Writer*

When Bill Barker considered having his first play produced at a theater in the San Fernando Valley, friends warned him that he would be embracing obscurity. The Company of Angels, a theater in Hollywood, had offered to produce the play, but he liked the work of Jeff Seymour, a director who recently opened the Gnu Theatre in a former North Hollywood delicatessen.

"An actor friend kind of looked at me and said, 'The Valley! Why wouldn't you want to have it done in Hollywood with an established theater?'" Barker said. But he took a chance, and he said he's happy he did. His play, a drama called "Best Wishes," has played to full houses since it opened Sept. 7 and most reviewers liked the play and the production.

Barker, 29, discovered what others who watch and participate in the Valley theater scene say they have noticed lately: Small theater productions here are achieving an unusual consistency of quality, they say, and are bringing in growing numbers of Valley resi-

dents, along with patrons from other parts of the city. A string of well-received local shows is one reason for this optimism. Another factor is the increasing numbers of affluent and educated people who theater owners say fill most of their seats.

## Small Theaters Do Well

"The place in Los Angeles where little theaters seem to be doing best is the Valley," said Carl Sautter, who in January completed a survey of conditions at about 800 theaters in Los Angeles for Actors Equity, the stage actors' union. Sautter's survey focused on relations between theaters and actors, but he said it also revealed a lot about local theaters in general, both in terms of general production quality and audience interest.

Among productions during the past year that have received good notices and which theater operators said have brought in audiences are "Say Good Night, Gracie," also at Seymour's Gnu Theatre, "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys and

"The Royal Family" at the Megaw Theatre in Northridge.

The Valley, along with Burbank, has about 15 theaters, a number that remains in flux as new ones open and others close or move. Figures on the number of people attending theater in the Valley have not been compiled, but several operators of more established theaters said their audiences have rapidly grown in size in the past three years.

At the 12-year-old Megaw Theatre, founder and artistic director Elaine Moe said, 16,000 people attended five productions in the 1984-85 season. She said that in the past, the number of patrons who attended more than two productions rarely increased annually by more than 500. However, since the 1983-84 theater season, that number has grown by 1,200, she said.

At the Back Alley Theatre, producing director Laura Zucker said, the 88-seat theater has been regularly playing to full houses in the past year. "Our audience has grown enormously, basically from the



Good plays pack audiences in at North Hollywood's 48-seat Gnu Theatre on Magnolia Boulevard.

JOHN McCOY / Los Angeles Times

Valley," she said.

Moe and others said that the ability of a new theater like the Gnu to draw consistently sizable audiences after a relatively short time demonstrates that the Valley is realizing its potential as a theater

scene.

The Gnu is the latest arrival among the equity waiver theaters in the Valley. An equity waiver theater is one allowed by Actors Equity to pay wages lower than union scale, provided the theater

has fewer than 99 seats. Often actors work at these theaters for free, which they do at the Gnu.

The theater is named after an African antelope also called a wildebeest. Seymour said he chose it

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# THEATER: Optimism

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simply because it sounded like an interesting, if bizarre, twist on the word "new." Seymour is a 28-year-old former actor who opened the theater to satisfy an itch to become a cultural entrepreneur. It seats 48 people and has been transformed in the six months he has been operating it into a quaint and comfortable theater with an Art Deco appearance outside and inside.

## Appearance a Key

Seymour, who leases the building and does most of the production work, said the theater's appearance was a cornerstone in his plan to make the theater viable. His strategy also includes recent plays by local playwrights and works with a strong grounding in traditional, realistic drama. Critics generally liked "Say Good Night, Gracie," his one production before "Best Wishes." Seymour directed it under the pseudonym of C. Moore Jeffries and also acted in it under his own name.

"I think there's a marked difference between his starting now and our starting 12 years ago, because the Valley itself has grown," said Moe, speaking of Seymour. "People used to talk almost always of going over the hill for theater, and you hear less of that and more of 'have you seen the production at such and such a theater?' and the location is meaning less.

"Some of us have had to combat the stigma of Valley, and I think it's going away."