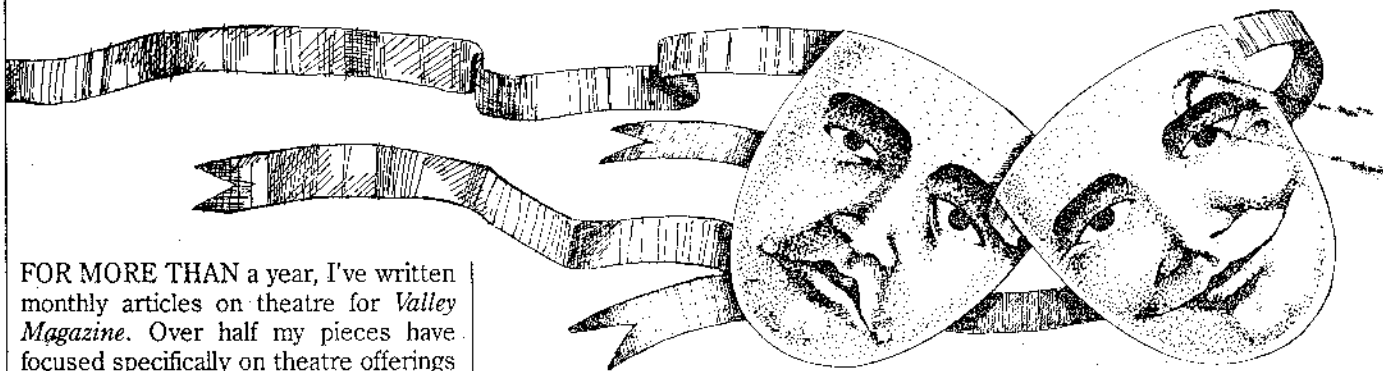


# What Is Valley Theatre?



FOR MORE THAN a year, I've written monthly articles on theatre for *Valley Magazine*. Over half my pieces have focused specifically on theatre offerings in the San Fernando Valley—an easy task, considering that at any particular time, theatregoers have close to two dozen professional productions they can choose from on local stages.

Nonetheless, concentrating as I have on Valley theatre has led me to repeatedly ask a very fundamental, yet difficult, question. It's a question many others have asked me since I began covering the Valley theatre scene. "Is there actually such a thing as 'Valley theatre?'" More specifically, are there special qualities that make productions on Valley stages unique to Southland theatre, much like New York's Broadway, Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway have their own distinct characteristics?

With these questions in mind, I recently talked with a cross-section of the hundreds of producers, directors and actors who work on local stages, as well as with Southern California's preeminent theatre critic. In separate conversations, I asked each of them if such a thing as

Valley theatre actually exists and—if so—what characteristics set it apart from other theatre in Los Angeles.

Everyone I spoke with seemed to agree that there is such a thing as Valley theatre—and that there isn't. Paradoxical as that may sound, there is a good sense behind it. Basically, Valley theatre exists by geographical definition—those theatres within the boundaries defined by the hills that ring the area. "We call it Valley theatre to distinguish it from theatre that's done over the hill," says Gretchen Weber, artistic director of Room for Theatre in Studio City. To local professionals, that distinction alone is significant. Little more than a decade and a half ago, the Valley was dominated by community theatre—amateur productions staged by acting clubs and local church and syna-

gogue groups. Studio City's Theatre East, founded in 1960, was an exception; and not until the mid- to late-seventies did the ranks of Equity Waiver theatres in the Valley grow.

So, claims that Valley theatre does exist are, in fact, affirmations that professional theatre is capable of existing—even thriving—in the San Fernando Valley. That point having been made, most of the experts I spoke with were swift to agree that, in terms of the range and quality of theatrical experiences it offers, there is no such thing as a Valley theatre apart from that of Los Angeles.

"Valley theatre has as broad a diversity in styles and genre of plays as does thea-

**By Norman Kolpas**

tre outside of the Valley," says Megaw Theatre artistic director Elaine Moe. "I think that the quality is extremely high," adds Maria Gobetti, artistic director of Burbank's Victory Theatre. And *Los Angeles Times* Theatre Critic Dan Sullivan got down to some specifics: "The Back Alley is doing some of the best theatre productions around. The Victory has been very good. The Gnu Theatre is comfortable and clean... and you do somewhat judge a play by the company it keeps—the theatre it's in."

Further, there are indications that, in their choice of plays, some Valley theatres do make concessions to what they perceive to be a special Valley audience. "I tend to think of it as a much older community," says Elizabeth Reilly of the Gnu Theatre in Toluca Lake. And Steve Kavner, leader of the Alley Oops improvisational comedy players at Actors Alley Theatre, has been known to jocularly welcome audiences with, "Welcome to Sherman Oaks, land of old people—and their parents."

Joking aside, the Valley is less oriented towards the young, singles lifestyle, with a more settled population than that of the West Side of town. And a wise theatre takes its audience into consideration when choosing its plays. "When we plan a season of shows," says Kavner of the Actors Alley repertory, "we do keep our community in mind. There's always a couple of shows we know will appeal to them, that won't shock them too much." For that reason, adds Weber, "we don't tend to do really experimental theatre."

During the past year, I've noticed an unusual characteristic in Valley audiences. It was vividly exemplified to me recently when I went to see "Ringers," a play that closed just before Christmas at the Back Alley. A large, elaborate red-brick construction was a major element of the play's set—so real-looking that one naturally wondered if the bricks *were* real. Before the play began, one man in the audience decided to find out. He stepped onto the stage, rapped a couple of bricks with his knuckles, declared "They're real!" and stepped back to his seat. You could call this man rude or unsophisticated if you like, but you'd be missing the point. He wasn't intimidated by the trappings of theatre. Sullivan, of the *Times*, laughs delightedly when told about this incident. "That is just exactly what I wanted to do," he says. "He was a good theatregoer."

What strikes the Back Alley's artistic producing director, Laura Zucker (herself a Valley resident), is the devotedness of her audience. An unusually large percentage of the theatre's subscriber list has the

same Van Nuys zip code as the Back Alley itself. And those audience members who come to the theatre for the first time tell her, "I passed your sign so many times, I just had to come to see what's going on." It's a good, safe feeling for the Back Alley. "We feel like we've been adopted here," says Zucker. "The audiences have an attitude of, 'This is my neighborhood theatre, I feel comfortable here.'"

Members of other local theatres bear out Zucker's observations. Steve Kavner sees "a community of people that always come to the Actors Alley." And in the audiences for the Alley Oops he feels "a sense of family, that it's another show that we all know in our local place." Elizabeth Reilly finds that her audiences at the Gnu

wood. "I found the audience at the Back Alley to be a very sophisticated, attentive, wonderful audience. When we moved to Hollywood, it was an entirely different audience. They did not get the subtleties of the play. I was pretty amazed." While Valley audiences love to patronize their local theatres, they don't like to travel over the hill. The many people who had been turned away by "Sold Out" signs at the Back Alley did not make the drive into Hollywood, and "Duet for One" closed a few weeks after it opened there.

And if Valley audiences won't travel to the West Side, well then, West Side theatres will just have to start coming to the Valley. Strange as that sounds, it's exactly what's happening at the Back Alley, which

## THE L.A. TIMES'

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"take theatre as more of a regular thing than on the West Side." And Elaine Moe has seen "a more intimate and informal acceptance of theatre" in audiences at the Megaw, quickly adding that, "by informal, I don't mean less serious."

Sullivan thought that his fellow ticketholders at a recent performance of the Gnu's "Best Wishes" exemplified the qualities of Valley audiences. "I really thought it was a wonderful audience. I had the feeling of families going there, of people who include theatre as part of their regular entertainment diet. They're a stable, mature brand of theatregoer."

That kind of quality in an audience does not go unnoticed or unappreciated by the people on stage. Linda Kelsey, a fine performer best known for her role as Billie Newman on the television series "Lou Grant," had a rare chance last spring to compare Valley and West Side audiences. She starred in "Duet for One" at the Back Alley, a critically-acclaimed production whose run was extended and then transferred to a theatre in Holly-

wood. "I found the audience at the Back Alley to be a very sophisticated, attentive, wonderful audience. When we moved to Hollywood, it was an entirely different audience. They did not get the subtleties of the play. I was pretty amazed." While Valley audiences love to patronize their local theatres, they don't like to travel over the hill. The many people who had been turned away by "Sold Out" signs at the Back Alley did not make the drive into Hollywood, and "Duet for One" closed a few weeks after it opened there.

The Valley's active support of quality local theatre reminds me of an important point made by the visionary British director Peter Brook in his book "The Empty Space." Brook feels that our language falls short of expressing the role an audience plays in the theatre. In English, we merely "attend" a play, and at best we're attentive to it. But in French, Brook points out, the verb for "to attend" is *assister*. And, truthfully, the audience is there to assist the players, to react, to add the element of empathy to the theatrical experience. Without a good, responsive audience, theatre falls flat; with the right audience, it can flourish. In that respect, Valley theatre is getting assistance of a level unmatched by other theatres in the city. **WM**