

## DRAMA-LOGUE

# THEATRE REVIEWS

OCT. 14 - 20, 1982

### 24 Hours

REVIEWED BY T. H. McCULLOH

Produced by Laura Zucker for the Back Alley Writers Lab, Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; 780-2240. Opened Oct. 3; "AM" plays Thurs., 8; Sat. & Sun., 4; "PM" plays Fri.-Sun., 8; thru Nov. 7.

It is easier to write a novel than a good short story; so it would follow that a one-act play causes more problems in construction than a full length work. When Pulitzer winner Paul Zindel can say to Oliver Hailey, who conceived the project, "Oliver, a five-minute play is so *hard*," one can imagine the difficulties encountered by all the playwrights at the Back Alley Writers Lab in creating their collection of five-minute dramas, *24 Hours*, a full day of playlets, one for each hour. Generally, they have come through with flying colors and *24 Hours* is chockful of fine writing and exceptional performances. As with any programs of this type there are weak spots (particularly three pieces written as monologues, which have thin dramatic impact) but the level of quality is so high that one barely notices as the pieces whiz past.

Presented in two programs, *AM* and *PM*, the plays not only follow the sun, they follow a winding path of introspectionism with approaches to the human condition as varied as the visions of the 24 playwrights. We congratulate the experienced playwrights who continue to probe their particular ideologies in this short form, and the newer writers who have given us an exciting glimpse of what they may accomplish in longer works.

**AM**—The morning hours are darker and the humor is deeper. At the top of the list is Michael Leeson's touching *Love Sonnet* (6 am), gently and understandingly directed by Will Mackenzie, with Doris Roberts wonderful as a distressed, lonely and none too bright middle-aged housewife writing a pitiful birthday poem to her 30-year-old son, and a beautifully restrained John Anderson as the husband who hasn't touched her in 30 years because she's such a slob. Roberts also shines (with Allan Miller's tight direction) in Lee Thomas' light as froth *Joe's Not Home* (7 am), with a rather surface Alan Oppenheimer as the next-door neighbor who nods in on his way to work to put the make on her while she peels carrots.

*Sleeping Together* (2 am) presents a difficult situation in a tastefully and warmly evolved script by David Link, directed with as much warmth and taste by Beverly Sanders. A confused and genuine young married man, back into most of his three-piece suit apologizes, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I thought I was a homosexual;" back into part of his west Hollywood levis and pullover, his young partner gently guides him through his trauma. It is played with touching frankness and reality by Jim Hornbeck and Paul Keenan. Bonnie and Paul Zindel have written a sharp little piece about a stage mother and the overweight daughter she prods (with Roberts and Oppenheimer as the parents), but even Allan Miller's vigorous direction of *Lemons in the Morning* cannot compensate for the totally misshapen performance of Margaret O'Keefe, for no reason exploding like Judith Anderson in *Medea*.

Joy Garrett is just that, a joy, in Daniel Gregory Brown's Cocteau-like *Four in the Morning* with Hornbeck as the husband she doesn't know, intricately directed by Marcia Rodd; director Miller also finds a surprisingly fluid movement with Garrett and Hornbeck in Susan Silver's delightful jigsaw *Five Minute Romance* (12 am). There is a bit of confused imagery in Terry Kingsley Smith's *I Want to Hold Your Hand* but Rodd's direction and the performances of Keenan and Hornbeck make it hold together; and the gentleness of Barbara Schultz' direction brings soft charm to a couple of runaways from a retirement home in Christine Rimmer's *Pelicans*, ably brought to life by Anderson and Hoffman. Schultz has trouble sparking Hoffman and Oppenheimer in Pamela Chais' thin *Sunny Side Up*, and although Anderson is strong under Cooper's direction of Jeff Levy's monologue *Shotgun Willis* it suffers from lack of direction and point. Dona Cooper's ping-pong direction brightens Allan Miller's nocturnal bickering between Hoffman and Anderson as *Faro Rides Again*. Although everything works (Mackenzie's direction, Garrett and Hornbeck's performances) in Jerry Mayer's clever portrait of the writer resigned to being hack, *The Underachiever* is in the vein of Neil Simon and seems oddly dated.

**PM**—Life seems brighter as the hour hand passes 12 noon, and the playwrights reflect the generally lighter mood in a series of frothy pieces which end on an ethereal, reflective note with Beth Henley's poetic *Hymn to the Attic* (12 pm). Here Schultz has brought imagination to her direction of Mary McCusker, Peter Van Norden and a fine kooky Maxine Stuart in Gothic tale of affection and resignation; the communion service at the end as Van Norden sings the hymn, is hypnotic. As ethereal and quite affecting Oliver Hailey's *About Time* (6 pm), also well directed by Schultz, with Stuart and Sandy Kenyon quietly etching elegant portraits of a couple sinking in their twilight years; he says he can only kill time and she responds, "We'll do it together." The funniest of the pieces is Sam Bobrick's arch knock at the B Apple, *An Eastern Fable* (2 pm), with McCusker and Phillip R. Allen trying to find a cure for Sandy Kenyon's psychotic wish to move to California; hilarious close second is *Opening Night* (10 pm), Bobrick's barbed bow to the playwright/critic stand-off in which author Kenyon has hired Allen to do poison in the ear of the *New York Times* critic; both pieces are brightly performed and directed with style by Dona Cooper.

Kenyon and Allen shine again in the opener, Jim McGinn's *The Temptation* (1 pm), a glimpse at the next step in corporate firing, with Rodd wisely directing at a bright tempo with a tongue in the cheek. Ar Raymond's *Lifeline* (3 pm) is an offbeat father/daughter birthday dinn with a craggy Val Bettin pulled into the restaurant on a rope so his daughter (a wonderfully sincere Rosanna Huffman) can tell him about her broken Lebanese liaison; it would work better if Rodd's direction were brighter. Bettin also excellent in his monologue *Sunrise on Earth* (5 pm), by Michael Lewin, directed by Cooper with a good feel for the metaphysical meanings in Bettin's glance at the life he's about to begin; of the three monologues, this was best. Rick Lenz' *Mr. Broadway* (11 pm), in spite of Cooper's direction at Allen's understanding reading remains just a man telling a story about another actor who has died.

Jackie Cassel brings a good mood to her reading of *Love in a Pub* (9 pm) ably guided by Michael Lessac, as she tries to convince Kenyon that it should be either her place or his; and McCusker, Stuart and Norden have a field day under Schultz' crisp direction in *Rules of the House* (7 pm), Dona Cooper's lively examination of the kind of family one likes to forget lives in the South. Again more reminiscent of writing for television than for the stage are Marc Rodd's slight computerized brief encounter, *Conversation 2001* (8 pm), written by Allen and Huffman, and the very ordinary thoughts about each other thought by Allen, Cassel, Huffman and Kenyon while doing the *Aerobics* (4 pm); both pieces are guided by Sanders.

The plays all work quite well on the all-purpose set designed by Z Wells, and are aided immeasurably by Christopher Milliken's intricate, subtle and warm lighting and the tasteful costumes coordinated by Hilary Sloane. Dick de Benedictis has composed delicious and appropriate original music, and Leonora Schildkraut's sound design is, as usual, superb. The over-all direction of *24 Hours* was supervised by Allan Miller.

Both programs are entertaining and, for the most part, rewarding. If you see one, it's a sure bet you'll pick up tickets for the other on your way out.