

'24 Hours' clocks in at 5 minutes per play

The wee hours of day give up a treasure of small secrets in 'AM' . . .

By Patricia Freeman
Herald Examiner staff writer

"24 Hours," a program of 24 witty, intelligent five-minute plays by 23 different authors, may be the perfect show for the television generation, and Allan Miller, Laura Zucker, Oliver Hailey (who conceived the show) and everybody else at the Back Alley Theater has done the world a service by producing it.

Given the fact that we have all been trained to expect dramatic conflict to be neatly resolved between commercials for denture glue and Datsuns, and since our attention spans have dwindled faster than the California condor population, it's thrilling to see that high-quality entertainment can be produced in concentrated form.

Of course, a five-minute play must sacrifice a certain amount of depth for the sake of brevity. The plays in "24 Hours" are comments, not conversations, hors d'oeuvres, not meals. But, like a well-chosen remark or a carefully prepared canape, they are satisfying.

Seven directors (Dona Cooper, Beverly Sanders, Marcia Rodd, Will Mackenzie, Allan Miller, Barbara Schultz, Michael Lessac) have polished each segment of the show to a fine sheen and displayed a cast of eminently professional actors to best advantage. Direction supervisor Allan Miller has deftly woven a grab bag of odd, colorful scraps of drama and comedy into a fine tapestry.

The program is divided into two parts, "AM" and "PM," each of which plays on a different night (you can see the entire collection by attending a matinee and an evening performance). The "AM" plays take place mostly in the secret hours of the morning. The "PM" plays take place in the dead of night or in the harsh glare of broad daylight.

"AM" has some outstanding moments. Michael Leeson's sweet-sour portrait of a bitter man and his gentle, slow-witted wife (marvelously played by John Anderson

and Doris Roberts and directed by Will Mackenzie) is the most notable; Susan Silver's "Five Minute Romance," a shorthand description of missed connections in a long-term love affair, is the most daring "AM" entry, thanks in large part to Allan Miller's adroit direction and Christopher Milliken's agile lighting; Terry Kingsley Smith's "I Want to Hold Your Hand" (acted by Paul Keenan and Alan Oppenheimer, directed by Marcia Rodd), about a young man who wards off angst by clinging to the stranger sitting next to him in an airplane, is touching; Allan Miller's crusty picture of connubial survival, "Fare Rides Again" (played by John Anderson and Elizabeth Hoffman, directed by Dona Cooper), is a tasty tidbit.

Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., 8 p.m. Thu; 4 p.m. Sat-Sun; 8 p.m. Fri-Sun, through October. Tickets \$5-\$8. Reservations: 780-2240

*... But 'PM' stories
ring true with darker
side of human frailties*

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As a whole, the "PM" program is superior to the "AM" program, which is full of predictable plots and Hollywood sentiments.

Originality and emotionality give "PM" the edge. The plays that attempt to deal with important human issues achieve their aspirations. Beth Henley's "Hymn in the Attic" (directed by Barbara Schultz and played by Mary McCusker, Maxine Stuart and Peter Van Norden), about a Southern school teacher and a retarded man, packs a poignant story and rich, Faulknerian characterizations into a few short minutes. Fredi Towbin's "Love in a Pub" speaks eloquently of loneliness in modern society (Jackie Cassel's sultry, vulnerable performance, directed by Michael Lessac, is the play's greatest asset). Rick Lenz's "Mr. Broadway" brings genuine sentiment to an old-fashioned, well-wrought monologue (masterfully spoken by Phillip R. Allen and directed by Dona Cooper).

Those plays that are trifles avoid annoying pretenses and, for the most part, are thoroughly engaging and skillfully constructed. Dona Cooper's "Rules of the House," about a stubborn old lady who refuses to go to church at the behest of her high-strung, shrewish daughter, is satisfying comedy.



Sam Bobrick's "Opening Night" (directed by Dona Cooper), a vignette about a frustrated playwright (Sandy Kenyon) who hires an assassin (Phillip R. Allen) to rub out a theater critic from the New York Times in order to prevent another scathing review, is devilishly, deliciously funny.

Most of the exceptional material in "PM" comes in the second act, which does not have a single weak play. Act 1 has little to write home about, with the possible exceptions of Jim McGinn's "The Termination" (played by Phillip R. Allen and Sandy Kenyon, directed by Marcia Rodd) and Oliver Hailey's "About Time" (starring Sandy Kenyon and Maxine Stuart, directed by Barbara Schultz), neither of which aspires to great artistic or moral heights.

Fortunately, "24 Hours" has no fatally weak link anywhere. Even if you do find reason to quibble with some part of the program, you'll only have to be unhappy for

Peter Van Norden, Maxine Stuart and Mary McCusker in Beth Henley's poignant "Hymn in the Attic" from "24 Hours PM"

five minutes.

Dick De Benedictis has composed a pleasing group of musical ellipses that connect one play to another. Zoe Wells has designed a spartan, functional set. Other cast members include Jim Hornbeck, Paul Keenan, Joy Garret, Margaret O'Keefe, Mary McCusker, Val Bettin, Rosanna Huffman and Peter Van Norden. Additional writers are David Link, Jeff Levy, Daniel Gregory Brown, Lee Thomas, Jerry Mayer, Pamela Chais, Christine Rimmer, Bonnie & Paul Zindel, Ann Raymond, Jack Matcha, Michael Lewis and Marcia Rodd.

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