

STAGE REVIEW

'24 HOURS'
REFRESHING,
INVENTIVEBy SYLVIE DRAKE,
Times Staff Writer

It was a clever idea to start with commissioning playwrights to write 10-minute one-acts (give or take a minute), one for each hour of the day, then stringing them together into two evenings of 12 pieces each called "AM" and "PM." Of course.

The resulting "24 Hours" (umbrella title) at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys is a particular kind of marathon that's been tried before, but much less successfully.

In 1979, the Actors' Theater of Louisville staged a grouping of mini-one-acts called "Holidays" based on all the major holidays of the year; and in 1980 the Odyssey Theater Ensemble tried "The Great American Playwrights' Show," (also known as "GAPS"), a string of five-minute shorties that chiefly had brevity in common. With the singular exception of a clever Marsha Norman playlet (in "Holidays"), neither collection rose much above the level of five-finger exercises.

This attempt is much better.

Happily, under the guidance of playwright Oliver Hailey (whose idea it was and whose oblique sense of humor it reflects), members of the Back Alley's Writers Lab have borne forth 24 mostly inspired mini-plays. They run the gamut from your basic Carol Burnett-influenced TV sketch ("Rules of the House" by Dona Cooper) and your standard lump-in-the-throat monologues (Rick Lenz's "Mr. Broadway," Jeff Levy's "Shotgun



Alan Oppenheimer, Doris Roberts, center, Margaret O'Keefe in Paul and Bonnie Zindel's "Lemons in the Morning," part of "24 Hours."

Willis"), to some adventurous, flinty, tender, original and esoteric pieces, proving, time and again, that you don't have to be long-winded to be good.

On the contrary. The plays deliver plenty of oddball humor that is, however, nearly always rooted in a deeply human context. Perhaps the most complete and completely satisfying are Michael Leeson's "Love Sonnet" and Susan Silver's "Five-Minute Romance," both featured in the "AM" portion of the program.

Leeson provides a shattering (also funny and strangely romantic) insight into an aging and severely chilled-down marriage, while Silver, like some sort of deadly accurate magic lantern, riffs—start to finish—through the unremitting agonies of a model modern-day relationship.

Sam Bobrick (of "Norman Is That You?") has contributed two pricelessly zany items to "PM." One is "An Eastern Fable," wherein a New Yorker is suspected of having contracted terminal shallowness for expressing a desire to move to Los Angeles. ("I hope that isn't the start of an epidemic," cries the badly shaken doctor in attendance.) The other is "Opening Night," about a desperate playwright's desperate measures to ward off yet another bad review.

Other subjects tantalize by their uncommon variety: computer matchmaking 2001, aerobic matchmaking 1982, homosexuality man-

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'24 HOURS' PLAYLETS

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queer, word games (Hailey's own "About Time"), poetic metaphysics (Michael Lewis' "Sunrise on Earth") and character studies (Beth Henley's "Hymn in the Attic").

If that's not offbeat enough, we have getting fired the modern way (Jim McGinn's "The Termination"), getting laid the modern way (Fredl Towbin's "Love in a Pkg"), aging parents, stage mothers and assorted other ego trips, losing one's mind and other such intimate terrors.

Space limitations prevent a more individual analysis which here is to the good, since it safeguards the precious element of surprise. What is encouraging is the refreshing and seemingly unlimited inventiveness deployed. Beyond those already mentioned, the writers (known and unknown) are Allan Miller, David Link, Daniel Gregory Brown, Terry Kingsley Smith, Lee Thomas, Jerry Mayer, Pamela Chais, Christine Rimmer, Bonnie and Paul Zindel, Ann Raymond, Jack Matcha and Marcia Rodd. Los Angeles can use them.

Actors it's got. Performances in "24 Hours" are uniformly superior, with eloquent direction contributed by Marcia Rodd, Michael Lessac, Beverly Sanders, Barbara Schultz, Dona Cooper, Will Mackenzie and Allan Miller (who also supervised).

Performers include John Anderson, Elizabeth Hoffman, Jim Hornbeck, Paul Keenan, Alan Oppenheimer, Joy Garret, Margaret O'Keefe and Doris Roberts in "AM"; Phillip Allen, Sandy Kenyon, Jackie Cassell, Val Bettin, Rosanna Huffman, Peter Van Norden, Mary McCusker and Maxine Stuart in "PM."

Zoe Wells has designed a stark unit set oddly reminiscent of "The Honeymooners'" apartment on TV. Christopher Milliken has supplied no-frills lighting and Hilary Sloane has coordinated all costumes.

Sound design by Leonora Schildkraut is unobtrusive, as is Dick de Benedictis' original music, which, in both cases is a compliment. Laura Zucker produced with Joanna Bongiovanni.

Even though "PM" appears to have a slight edge of quality over "AM," "AM" contains the two uncontested winners of the 24-play field, so both programs are strongly recommended—at your leisure. Effortless fun is the name of this game, with satisfaction virtually guaranteed.

If a play isn't quite up to your standards, you only have to wait a minute. Another will soon be along. That's the beauty of the format, its challenge and, in this case, its triumph.

Performances at 15231 Burbank Blvd. (near the corner of Sepulveda) run weekends until Nov. 7. Call the theater for program, days, times and reservations: 780-2240.

CALENDAR

STAGE

OPENING

TUESDAY

THE NICHOLAS BROTHERS (The Pan Alley Theater, Variety Arts Center, 940 S. Figueroa St., 623-9100). The dance team of Harold and Fayard Nicholas, with special guest Pat Harrington Jr., in the latest edition of The Entertainers series. Tue. only, 7:30 p.m.

WEDNESDAY

FEMALE PARTS (Los Angeles Actors' Theater Half-Stage, 1089 N. Oxford Ave., 464-5500). Four one-acts by Franca Rame and Dario Fo about the subjugation of women by the church, the state and male society. Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m. Ends Jan. 16.

FRIDAY

A CHRISTMAS CAROL: THE MUSICAL (Park Plaza Playhouse, 130 E. Lime St., Monrovia, 355-5552 or 358-3868). A new musical version of the Dickens classic by Michael Kelley and Roger Kelley. Fri.-Sat., 8:30 p.m.; Sun. mats., 2:30 p.m. Ends Dec. 18.

RELATIONSHIPS (New One-Act Theater Ensemble, Artic Theater, 6562 Santa Monica Blvd., 285-1060). Three one-act plays by Irene Oppenheim, Bart Schneider and Michael Kazan. Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m. Ends Dec. 18.

SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL (Magaw Theater, 17601 Saticoy St., Northridge, 881-8169). Elaine Moe directs Richard Brinsley Sheridan's 18th-Century comedy, designed by Garland Riddle. Wed.-Sat., 8:30 p.m.; Sun., 5 p.m. Ends Dec. 19. Resumes Jan. 7-30.

SATURDAY

MARY BARNES (Odyssey Theater Ensemble, 12111 Ohio Ave., 826-1626). David Edgar's drama of a woman's excursion through the labyrinth of schizophrenia. Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m. Ends Jan. 9.

AS TO THE MEANING OF WORDS (Los Angeles Repertory Theater, 85-1/2 W. Colorado Blvd., Pasadena, 795-8646). Mark Eychman's drama based on a doctor's trial for manslaughter resulting from abortion. Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7:30 p.m. Ends Jan. 15.

CONTINUING

Opinions are those of Times

reviewers. Readers are advised to call theaters to confirm dates

BEATLEMANIA (Beverly Theater, 9404 Wilshire Blvd., Beverly Hills, 274-6865). Tue.-Thur., 8 p.m.; Fri., Sat., 7:30 and 10:30 p.m.; Sun., 3 and 7:30 p.m. Ends Dec. 5.

BRAYO! A MUSICAL PORTRAIT OF EDITH Piaf (Mayfar Theater, 214 Santa Monica Blvd., Santa Monica, 451-0621). Sheldon Epps directs Denise Le Brun and Jordan Charney in the musical drama about the French chanteuse. Wed.-Thur., 8:30 p.m.; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 and 8:30 p.m. Ends Jan. 2.

BROTHERS (South Coast Repertory

Second Stage, 656 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa, 714-967-4000). George Sbrodoff's drama. "A rapidly engrossing play that crumbles in the second act with Sbrodoff's failure to persuasively argue complex emotional and moral points" (Sylvie Drake). Tue.-Sat., 8:30 p.m.; Sun., 8 p.m.; Sat., Sun. mats., 3 p.m. Ends next Sun.

DEVIATIONS AND DELIGHTS (Westwood Playhouse, 10086 Le Conte Ave., Westwood, 208-5454). Vincent Price stars as Oscar Wilde in John Gay's monodrama. Ends today, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m.

THE DIVINERS (South Coast Repertory Mainstage, 656 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa, 714-967-4000). A back-sliding preacher and an "idiot boy" with the power for diving water are featured in the Jim Leonard Jr. play. Tue.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., Sun. mats., 2:30 p.m. Ends Dec. 2.

I READ THE NEWS TODAY, OH BOY! (Schey Foot Restaurant, 801 W. Temple St., 972-7654). Gwen Arner and Donald Moffat blend today's headlines

★ BEST BETS ★

BLEACHER BUMS (Burbage Theater: Century City Playhouse, 10508 W. Pico Blvd., 839-3322). A nine-inning comedy about the people who watch the Chicago Cubs. "As sunny and uncomplicated as two hours at the ballpark" (Dan Sullivan). Thur., Fri., 8:30 p.m.; Sat., 7:30 and 10 p.m.; Sun., 7:30 p.m. Runs indefinitely.

GREEK (L.A. Theater Works at the Metro Theater, 7657 Melrose Ave., 852-1445). "Steven Berkoff's nude response to the Oedipus legend, with Eddie, a tough nut from the East End who isn't about to pluck out his eyes for anybody. Berkoff's dialogue is in the extreme, uncouth, but his staging is immaculate, and the cast of four—headed by John Francis as Eddie—are as precise as a trapeze team" (Dan Sullivan). Tue.-Sun., 8 p.m. Ends Dec. 15.

I'M GETTING MY ACT TOGETHER AND TAKING IT ON THE ROAD (Cabaret at the Aquarius, 6230 Sunset Blvd., 466-4200). Gretchen Cryer returns in her and Nancy Ford's musical about a liberated pop singer vying to please her manager. "A slick, funny and touching musical that zips by, intermissionless, with the unmistakable ring of truth. The Aquarius' new cabaret setting is perfect" (Sylvie Drake). Tue.-Fri., 8:30 p.m.; Sat., 7 and 10 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Ends Jan. 2.

LOU GEHRG DID NOT DIE OF CANCER/TWO OUT, BOTTOM OF THE NINTH (McCadden Place Theater, 1157 N. McCadden Place, 661-3771). One-

acts by Jason Miller and Vince McKevitt. "A uniformly talented and attractive ensemble in a warmly human, richly comic tribute to the pride of achievement" (John C. Mahoney). Fri.-Sun., 8 p.m. Ends Dec. 19.

SISTER MARY IGNATIUS EXPLAINS IT ALL FOR YOU (L.A. Stage Co., 1642 N. Las Palmas Ave., 461-2755). A friendly little chat on the Roman Catholic faith, as interpreted by a nun who may have spent too many years teaching fifth grade. "Wickedly funny. Playwright Christopher Durang is clearly out to settle some old scores with Sister Mary, but he likes her starch, as does Elizabeth Huddle. The play will remind some of why they left the church, and others of why they stay in it" (Dan Sullivan). Preceded by Durang's one-act, "The Actor's Nightmares." Tue.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 7 and 10 p.m.; Sun., 3 and 8 p.m. Runs indefinitely.

TWENTY FOUR HOURS (Black Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 780-2240). Two programs of 12 five-minute plays each, written by such contemporary playwrights as Oliver Healey, Beth Henley, Paul Zindel and Allan Miller. "The plays deliver plenty of odd-ball humor that is nearly always rooted in deeply human content. Their unmitigated inventiveness is encouraging. Both programs are strongly recommended" (Sylvie Drake). The "AM" program plays Thu.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 4 p.m. The "PM" program plays Fri., Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., 4 p.m. Runs indefinitely.