

Los Angeles Times

Valley Weekend

THEATER REVIEW

Golden West Proves Its Versatility in Two-Night Production of One-Acts: The playwrights' debut at new Road Theatre venue offers eclectic mix of comedy and drama.

November 23, 1995 | ROBERT KOEHLER | SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Give a playwright a home, goes the wisdom, and watch the plays come. The Road Theatre has followed the advice, and the plays are indeed coming.

In its former Van Nuys industrial park space, the theater provided the Golden West Playwrights with a workshop home in the upstairs loft.

The theater has moved to the Lankershim Arts Center, so the Golden West group has moved with it, and its first outing in the new digs is a two-night edition of nine one-acts called "Roadside Attractions."

Tom Robbins fans shouldn't confuse this with that novelist's first work, "Another Roadside Attraction." Taken together, though, the nine pieces can be just as all over the map, and sometimes as nutty as Robbins' wildest moments.

Take the first evening's bill, starting with writer-director Lou Felder's "The Man in the Red Suit." A tad inspired by "Miracle on 34th Street," Felder has harried businessman Douglas (Christopher Faville) thrust into a one-on-one with the real St. Nick (Michael Dempsey)--who, of course, has some meaningful advice that will probably change Douglas' life.

Felder, though, is light on the moralizing, unlike Dale Griffiths Stamos, whose "The Unintended Video" uneasily blends liberal guilt, social attitudes about deformed people and Vietnam all into a murky, melodramatic mix. William Fuller's lonely vet is haunting (Patricia Richarde plays the guilty liberal), but, under Allison Vail's direction, it is more in spite of than as a result of the writing.

The most structurally interesting piece of either evening is Dean Farell Bruggeman's "Safe Distance," fluidly directed by Michael Paxton. Dryly satirizing white attitudes about post-riot Los Angeles, Bruggeman presents a cast of women (Shauna Bloom, Bethany Carpenter, Monica Deeter and Marci Hill) using their film, TV and acting talents to "deal" with issues--almost always with ridiculous but unexpected results.

Unlike most of his Golden West colleagues, Bruggeman admirably refuses to stay confined to one room or one time frame.

Sam Ingrassia's "Pearl Harbor Day in Muncie" is the evening's second piece to deal with Vietnam, but with little impact, despite Milt Kogan's and Frank Rossi's felt performances under Bert Rosario's direction.

Barbara Lindsay's "Grunions," directed by Ann-Giselle Spiegler, follows the well-worn but solid one-act formula of placing two characters (in this case, husband and wife played by Peter Jessop and Lindsay) in a situation that symbolizes their relationship. Waiting for the grunion run might seem a bit trite for marrieds-in-crisis, but Lindsay earns her hopeful ending.

The second evening's bill follows the first's comedy-then-drama programming, though less inventively. Jon Bastian does wonderful things with two characters whose only tie is a nasty-minded fortune-cookie fortune in "Guerrilla Cookies." Stephanie Lesh directs the amusing Joe Byrnes and Sean Farrell so that their separate monologues intertwine, making for a play with fresh things to say about '90s cynicism.

Frawley Becker wants to skewer pre-AIDS-era hetero-swingers, but "Dreamhouse" is a bit too clever and long for its own good. Tamara Zook's confused woman doesn't know what to make of Paul Haber's man. (Is he a stutterer or playing at one? And if so, why?) And though Becker wants us to feel Zook's confusion, the psycho-game here ultimately isn't worth playing, under Patricia Lee Willson's direction.

Cynthia J. Cohen's "Nate" feels like an extended showcase for Dennis Cockrum's comic schtick as old, forgetful, motor mouth Nate, bugging fellow dental patient Maggie (Elizabeth Tobias) nearly out of her mind. It's funny under Carmen Thomas' direction, but in a TV sort of way.

Tim Toyama's "Visas and Virtues" is literally a world away from this fluff--a serious, firmly paced (by director Tom Donaldson) historical drama of how Japanese wartime consul to Lithuania, Sempo Sugihara (Chris Tashima), defied Tokyo and issued thousands of travel visas to Jews escaping Nazi Europe.

Toyama zeros in on one case involving a childless couple (Diana Georger and Lawrence Craig) who aids Sugihara's wife, Yukiko (the gracious Susan Fukuda), in return for the humane, bureaucratic act. Toyama has a play here, except for a coda that's an unneeded appendage.

DETAILS

* WHAT: "Roadside Attractions."

* WHERE: The Road Theatre, 5108 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood.

* WHEN: Evening A: 8 p.m. Wednesdays and Saturdays. Evening B: 8 p.m. Fridays and Sundays. Ends Dec. 17.

* HOW MUCH: \$9.

* FYI: (818) 761-8838.