

L.A. stages play for the creatives

Small theaters exist as showcases for talent

By ROBERT HOFLE

Sometimes it becomes painfully clear the theater is not there for the audience.

I realized this in 2003 when I overheard Estelle Parsons and Al Pacino at the Broadway preem party of their "Salome" as they chatted enthusiastically about "how different" that night's indulgent, inchoate performance had been from all the previews.

The thought occurred often this November, as I attended a number of shows staged in L.A.'s vast world of Equity-waiver theater, where 99 seats is the upper limit.

This kind of theater is not about the aud -- we're merely guests who wander in from the nearest strip mall -- but rather the writers, directors and actors who make \$11 an appearance in theaters that rent anywhere from \$300 to \$750 a shot on the weekend, and weekday perfs are unheard of.

Even on a Saturday night, this milieu too often resembles that uncomfortable first scene in Tim Burton's film "Ed Wood" where the theater seats are half empty and the few patrons are outnumbered by the buckets to catch rainwater from a leaky roof. My experience wasn't terribly different, except that it didn't rain in L.A. this November and the press did show up, although I sometimes bailed at intermission. (Note to L.A. producers: if Hugh Jackman and Daniel Craig can get away with 90 minutes on Broadway, you should aim for a taut 60.) I limited my tour to world premieres in this 99-seat realm, passing up such intriguing revivals as "Three Tall Women," "Women Behind Bars" and "The Trojan Women." It's definitely different from the Music Center or Broadway.

New York City and Chicago may have better reps as theater towns, but in the universe of Equity-waiver theaters, L.A. is the epicenter. Unlike Chi, there's a bottomless reservoir of film and TV actors here or, at least, people who call themselves actors. In some ways, the L.A. scene recalls the network of tiny Manhattan theaters that used to exist in SoHo and the Village in the 1970s -- venues that housed the works of Richard Foreman, Tom Egan, Harvey Fierstein, Rev. Al Carmines and Charles Ludlam. Where the West Coast differs is not with physical theaters but the level of creative talent.

Granted, not many of the plays from that period have endured: "Women Behind Bars," "International Stud" (as part of "Torch Song Trilogy") and "The Mystery of Irma Vep,"

which actually came later, in 1984. Yes, it was a more experimental period, but what these writers had was vision and strong directors (often themselves) who could relate their strangely wonderful worldview to an eager, receptive and young aud.

Thirty years later, L.A.'s 99-seaters seem eager to be a safe breeding ground for the jukebox musical. Having birthed "Rock of Ages" and "The Marvelous Wonderettes," "Baby, It's You" recently transferred from the tiny Coast Playhouse to the Pasadena Playhouse, where its mixed critical reception shouldn't inhibit Broadway ambitions. Now playing at L.A.'s Equity-waiver theaters are "Life Could Be a Dream" (Hudson Guild), billed as "the 1960 doo-wop musical," and "Just Imagine" (NoHo Arts Center), which is ghoulishly subtitled "John Lennon performs one last concert and you are there."

Whoever said that small theaters had to restrict themselves to adventurous, daring, risk-taking fare?

Stumbling across the occasional gifted interpretive artist, i.e. actor, is nice. But where's the beef, the creative meat of a truly talented writer? He arrived late in my tour.

Gabe McKinley's "Extinction" (RED DOG SQUADRON at the Elephant) begins like so many plays about two straight guys trying to get laid on vacation in Atlantic City. McKinley writes a wittily languorous opening, but then his drama veers off into a scary, harrowing party that no one seems able to escape. Kurt Boetcher's clever hotel-suite set mirrors the McKinley's unexpected role reversal, and the two male leads, Michael Weston and James Roday, have calibrated their perfs to fit the intimate confines of a 99-seater. Kudos, too, to director Wayne Kasserman for bringing light to this very dark view of the sexes. If McKinley doesn't push the boundaries of writing, a la Carmines or Ludlam, it's a good guess that "Extinction" will continue to be performed longer than such '70s fare as "The Faggot."

A handful of fine perfs and one potentially great play might not seem like much after a month-long theatergoing journey. Then again, I'm sure I suffered through a lot of junk during the 1970s in New York City. But we tend to remember great moments and fiascos while we forget the mundane disappointments -- such as productions where audiences are just bystanders.