

entertainment

'California Suite's' four comedies need improvement

By Peg Sheldrick

California Suite is a not-so-sweet set of four comedies by Neil Simon that has plenty of room for improvement.

The ingredients seem right for a spectacular success, with Simon scripting, Herbert Ross directing, and Jane Fonda, Alan Alda, Walter Matthau, Bill Cosby, Elaine May, Richard Pryor, Michael Caine, and Maggie Smith starring.

The combined efforts of all these talented people has produced instead a moderately funny and ultimately unsatisfying quartet of stories. The whole thing comes off like an odd parfait—nothing seems to blend with anything else and in the end it's a little hard to digest.

review

The story given the most attention is a bittersweet (emphasis on the bitter) episode starring Fonda and Alda as a divorced couple trying to settle custody of their 17-year-old daughter.

This one might have worked better as a separate movie; as it is, it's a cramped and talky piece that never builds much tension since it's obvious who will win from the first. The characters are rather one-sided.

Snipping witch

Fonda does her best as the ex-wife, but Simon has made her such an acerbic, snipping witch and it's hard to work up any sympathy for her in her softer moments.

His idea of a strong woman seems to be abusive, selfish, and snobbish.

Simon obviously wants us to sympathize with the husband, but the conflict between the two is too lopsided. Director Ross seems to want to temper Fonda's nastiness by shooting her in cheesecake outfits and poses. It's awfully sour cheesecake, though.

The Michael Caine-Maggie Smith story works much better. Smith is an English actress nominated for an Oscar and Caine is her antique dealer husband. These two get the best lines in the movie.

Their scenes bubble along quite merrily until the end, where, unfortunately, the bubbles become suds. Caine and Smith are excellent throughout. If the ending wasn't so soupy, it would be the only unqualified success of the movie.

Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor get the most laughs in their little comedy of errors about a pair of doctors on a dream vaca-

tion turned nightmare.

Physical comedy

Pryor and Cosby do have some funny lines, but physical comedy dominates. It's too bad, since both men are gifted comedians and Simon's forte is snappy dialogue. Maybe Simon was trying to balance the verbal comedy in the other sketches with physical comedy in this one. It seems rather excessive, though.

Walter Matthau and Elaine May have the shortest story, a little farce about infidelity, full of schtick and stereotypes. It has its moments, but in the end its sympathies

seem misplaced. Again, the fault lies more with the writing than with the acting.

The one really outstanding aspect of the movie is its score. Claude Bolling has composed some fine, jazzy music that gives the film its only unity besides its location.

California Suite isn't terribly bad. If nothing else, it offers a sunny alternative to the world outside the theater. The problem is that it is only fair where one would expect it to be fantastic. There are some good laughs, but overall it's uneven and sometimes too cynical to be much fun.

California Suite is currently playing at the Stuart Theater.



Photo courtesy of Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc.

Bill Cosby, left, is threatened by Richard Pryor with a tennis racket in Neil Simon's *California Suite*.

Kids' art show has new aim—publicity for kids' theatre

By Peg Sheldrick

They look like the usual array of crayon scrawlings and assorted collages that paper the back wall of an elementary school classroom. But this display of pre-teen art serves a much different purpose than lauding the artistic efforts of Miss Pidget's third grade class.

The exhibit in question is the Children's Art Show at the Lincoln Community Playhouse, and it has been organized to call attention to the Children's Theatre fund drive.

The Playhouse hopes the show generates interest in arts for and by young people. Local youngsters donated drawings, paintings and even a seed picture to the show, which runs through Feb. 4.

The works are on display in the Playhouse lobby and can be seen from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. weekdays, from 1 to 5 p.m. weekends, and during performances of *A Man for All Seasons*. Information on children's theatre across the country is posted along with the art work.

Construction started

Construction on the new Children's Theatre wing began last fall. The space will be used not only for children's theatre, and classes but for rehearsals, set construction and storage.

"We don't want it separated," said Lenette Schwinn, director of Children's Theatre at the Playhouse. The children will perform on mainstage from time to time, just as the regular company will use the children's wing periodically.

Children's theatre has been part of the program at the Playhouse for four years and has grown from an annual Christmas play to three plays a year as well as classes on four levels. As the program has

grown, so has the need for the additional space, Schwinn explained. With six adult plays and the children's shows all vying for the same stage, quarters have been cramped, she said.

Schwinn has 500 students, ranging from second to ninth graders. This includes a program for exceptional kids, sponsored by the Junior League and the Lincoln Public Schools in con-

junction with the Playhouse. The Playhouse offers theatre classes to handicapped, mentally retarded, and gifted children.

Budding thespians

The classes focus on acting, but budding thespians also try make-up, tour the light booth, build props, and even try their hands at costuming.

In addition to acting, the students learn about mime and improvisation. Each class presents a play and some have performances outside the Playhouse.

The classes touch on many areas, but Schwinn would like some courses to cover specific areas in more depth. Another goal for the program is to widen its perspective to include other art forms.

The current art show is only one of several activities planned to call attention to children's theatre at the Playhouse. The biggest event will be a children's Art festival in March, when the new wing will be completed. Plans include tours, puppet shows, luncheons, films, and presentations of mime and ballet.

"Children's theatre is really important to theatre in general," said Schwinn. "I don't intend to make every child an actor or an actress. I try to make them potential good theatre-goers." Schwinn says she tries to stimulate the child's imagination. "That's the biggest thing—their imagination...to know what they want and to be able to put it together."

The Children's Theatre presented *A Three Penny Christmas* during the recent holiday season, and their next production will be *Tom Sawyer*. The casts include some older actors, but only when the role calls for an older person. "We've been using mostly young people in the shows," said Schwinn, "and we gear it toward the young audience."

