

Alternative Theater In The Valley

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There are a couple of new theater alternatives popping up on the Valley scene. Just don't call them alternative theater.

Chyro Arts Venue, which wraps up its inaugural season next month, is a reincarnation of *Is What It Is Theatre*, a small but plucky company that was often labeled "alternative," even though it didn't do much of the risky, confrontational material that you might see at, say, *Stray Cat Theatre*. This time out, artistic director Tom Leveen says he wants to push the envelope a bit more and "not shy away from material that some people might be offended by." But "alternative" still isn't in his vocabulary.

In the fall, Chyro will host another new company called *Progressive Theatre Workshop*. As the name implies, it aims to flout the conventions of traditional stagecraft, but also studiously avoids any allusion to alternativeness.

"'Alternative' is an established, stable genre. 'Progressive' is constantly changing," says founder John Caswell Jr., offering a Cliffs Notes manifesto.

As in the music industry, "alternative" is a label that once conferred a hip cachet but has become so overused that you begin to wonder if it means anything at all. One of the mostly widely used adjectives in the theater world also has become one the mostly widely avoided.

Even *Stray Cat*, which almost everyone agrees is alternative, prefers the term "indie" (for its cinematic connotations).

Stray Cat's artistic director, Ron May, boldly goes where other theaters fear to tread; next season he plans a "Scientology pageant" performed by grade-school kids. But he avoids the word "alternative," he says, because it makes some theatergoers think "there's not going to be a set, people are going to be in tunics, there won't be any sound design, and it's going to be all performance-arty and weird."

Contrary to Caswell's assertion that alternative is a "stable genre," it is anything but. The general definition is that it's risky art that wouldn't play in a mainstream theater, but that's begging the question: If alternative means not-mainstream, what is mainstream? Not-alternative, of course!

Nearly Naked Theatre has been called the Valley's leading alternative company. But founder Damon Dering, who will direct *Reefer Madness: The Music* in June, wouldn't mind losing the label.

"Alternative theater is really based on the market that you're in," he says. "Without a doubt what we do at Nearly Naked is alternative to the mainstream in Arizona, but it may not be considered alternative to the mainstream on the East Coast. . . . *The Who's Tommy* is a Broadway show that ran for 800 performances or something crazy (899, to be exact). But no one had ever done it here. So we are an alternative theater in this market."

On the other hand, among the Valley's established professional companies, Actors Theatre routinely produces plays that would fit in fine on Stray Cat's schedule but that other theaters wouldn't touch with oven mitts. Examples in recent seasons include *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, with its Tarantinoesque exploding heads, and *The Goat*, a dark comedy about bestiality. Yet both are by famous, critically acclaimed playwrights (Martin McDonagh and Edward Albee, respectively), and no one calls Actors Theatre alternative. Why?

The short answer is money. In the end, "alternative" is shorthand that signals two things about a theater: artistic adventurousness and a modest budget.

The two are not unrelated, Dering says.

"Once you are spending a certain amount in each production, the risk of losing that to a bomb, will it be catastrophic to the company?" he says. "An alternative theater can shrug off a big bomb and move on to the next play, but a theater spending \$100,000 on a production might never recover. Therefore they're taking less risk, and alternative theater is really about risk."

So maybe there is some sense to the label after all. But the consensus seems to be that it has outlived its usefulness.

"I have a very wide view of what is mainstream," says Matthew Wiener, artistic director at Actors Theatre.

"To me, alternative theater has more to do with form than content. If you're doing plays that are not based in a Western narrative linear tradition, that can be alternative. If you are doing plays that are not performed in a traditional theater space, that might be considered alternative. . . .

"If one were to do a play with all holograms, that would be alternative."

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