Optimism dybbuk conquers

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The mad-dog syndrome has struck again in Thresher reviewing circles: superlatives once more issue forth from the mouth in a ceaseless froth—sort of dribbling all over the floor.

Tsk.

True, the superlative version of chronic orchid-throwing (or eating as the case may be) — this dread disease has not yet reached its terminal stage (Sir John, as yet, remains un-orchid pelted) but still something has happened that will confound even the more or less “sophisticated” in our midst.

Sad, Very Sad

Now, if anybody saw that abysmal excuse for a season last year, it would seem obvious that nothing — but nothing could save the Alley from the morass of mediocrity. All this was sad, very sad.

But somehow, despite last season’s ashes, or perhaps because of last season’s ashes, Nina Vance has determined to make the Alley’s last curtain call at the old building in a blaze of glory.

First we had “The Trojan Women” — and now the “Tenth Man” which glows with a warmth and shines with a brilliance that not even certain other Houston critics could deny. The play is charming, utterly winning, and about as good or better a production than Houston has seen in the past year.

The reasons are not so obscure. Nina Vance has taken actors in twos from the New York and road-show companies, put them on her arena floor, and has let the play do the rest.

For instance, far and away the best of a generally good cast was Martin Garner (Schlissel) who played the role for all but two of the eighteen months “The Tenth Man” lasted on Broadway. With talent like that, how could you lose?

The Alley doesn’t. In addition to Schlissel, the Alley puts road-show vets into the roles of Foreman (Morris Strassberg), the young rabbi (Gene Gross) and especially Hirschman (Anatol Winogradoff) and, believe me, the talent was obvious.

The play tells the story of an exorcism of a dybbuk. Yes, a dybbuk, which, for the less ethnic in our midst, is roughly equivalent to a devil (only it’s a Jewish devil).

Anyhow, this gire (Foreman’s daughter) has one — she thinks she’s “The whore of Kiev, companion of sailors” (all of which makes for some interesting conversation between the dybbuk and a strange young neurotic who comes to form a quorum for the synagogue service).

But, more importantly, the play is funny — Schlissel, Foreman, Alper, all the old men who hang around the synagogue are magnificently Jewish, gloriously Yiddish, and unalterably hysterical.