

ENTERTAINMENT

Nuclear War a la Tennessee

Clay
Citadel Theatre
Rice Stage
April 6-28

review by James MacDonald

If Tennessee Williams had reached his prime in the 1980's he probably would have written *Clay* which opened at the Citadel's Rice Theatre Saturday night.

Present are many Williams trademarks: the interminable pauses, the anguished son, the reminiscences of better days gone by; missing are the beautifully crafted characters, and, most importantly, the fantastic speeches made by these characters. The result, written by Peter Whelan and directed by Gordon McDougall, is a curious but unintriguing play which attempts to deal with three of society's biggest problems: aging, marital crises, and (if you can believe it), nuclear war. No small task, to be sure, and while Whelan handles it quite well, one wonders why he bothered.

The title refers to the tool of the trade for Ben, (John Innes) a middle aged potter who has lost his creativity. More deeply, however, the clay represents immortality in its lifelessness, a substance which, while never alive, will outlive humanity after the holocaust. It is for this reason that Bert's 16-year-old son, Jimmy (Mathew Smith), makes clay figures and buries them, a remembrance for any future masters of the earth. Bert's wife Micky (Diane Hollingsworth) makes pottery, and seems to be siphoning her talent from Bert's dwindling supply.

Bert, Micky, Jimmy, and Micky's mother, Em, live in a reclusive house on the moors of England. There is a nearby missile tracking station, as well as an armed forces base. There are streaking jets overhead and military manoeuvres nearby. The jets torture Jimmy they are a constant reminder of the doom he feels is just around the corner. Em (Ann Casson), in her senility, seems oblivious to any and all goings on about her. But she lives in the past — a past before the end of the Second world War, before the nuclear age.

To this group add Pat (Geoffrey Saville-Read) and Win (Judy Cooke). They are old friends of Bert and Micky's and are returning after 11 years in high-tech Germany to seemingly simple and idyllic rural England. Here we have a Big Chill-ian kind of reunion, full of remembrances of wilder younger years while at the same time recognizing



Clay: A study of aging, marital problems, and nuclear war

the responsibilities of the present. Win and Pat have had marital problems, and Win returns in a futile attempt to recreate the past.

Clay is often complex and interesting, even with its overworked theme. It is packed with dry wit, often very funny, but, as with the main point of the play, the humour is aimed at the age-group of these couples. This is not to say the play cannot be appreciated by the younger generation, but for the most part, the appreciation is as an outsider. The play holds together well, though it is stretched thin at some points. It is at times subtle, blunt, interesting, confusing, and dull.

The performances in *Clay* are, on the whole, very good. Casson is particularly good as the elder outsider looking in at the complexities faced by her daughter's generation. Cooke is also very good as Win, the woman coming to the ultimate realization of her generation's stupidity and their loss of freedom. She loses her expression near the

end, however, at a time when it is most necessary. Innes, Saville-Read, and Hollingsworth are also fine. Only Smith is disappointing, giving a performance that makes us question the necessity of his character. He stumbles through a speech that is supposed to reveal the underlying theme of the play.

Richard Sims' set is beautifully crafted, a fine blend of modernized rusticism that reflects one theme of the play.

The main problem with *Clay* lies in its choice of subject. The playwright seems entirely capable of tackling all three problems singularly, or even two at a time, but combining the three confuses the ultimate point of the play. Presumably, there is a message to be found in it, but it is extremely hazy and leaves the audience no direction to formulate their own opinions.

The other major fault of the play is the agonizing pauses inserted after what the

playwright obviously feels is a bombshell line (no pun).

Here is another touch of Williams, but the lines are neither as dramatic or as powerful as Whelan thinks. It simply throws off the pacing, and detracts from the overall dramatic effect.

All things considered, *Clay* is fairly good entertainment. Although it is cluttered and unnecessary at times, it has engrossing moments. As one student to others, however, I find it hard to recommend, because it is written for the previous generation, and we can only understand it through Jimmy's unclear eyes. Its "ban the bomb" theme is not strong enough to attract anybody but the staunchest anti-nuker and it is difficult for any under-25ers to identify with the despair of lost youth. Professors may enjoy it, but there is really nothing there for students.



Photo Bill St. John

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