

Hot I Baltimore populated with self-defeating caricatures

Russian realism meets American commercialism in third-year theatre production

Hot I Baltimore
by Lanford Wilson
Atkinson Theatre
until tonight

By JASON SHERMAN

Hot I Baltimore walks a curious cultural line between the tensions of an Anton Chekhov play and the surface banality of a Mary Tyler Moore situation comedy. The three-act play, set in a run-down hotel lobby, seems an odd choice for a third-year theatre workshop which, according to director Stephen Gregg, has as its focus characterization and character interplay. The characters are, for the most part, all too familiar to be of much interest. How often can we be exposed to a hooker with a heart of gold, a complaining old man and a bothered desk clerk, before we begin to write the script ourselves?

There is no sense of individuality, nothing to mark one hotel guest from another, aside from their purely social functions. But even these roles do not clearly separate them, because little or no account is provided of the society from which they came. The outside world of the play seems to consist of far-off pastures and well-timed train whistles. While this may tie into the

play's underlying thematic concern—the death of The Land—there are still far too many assumptions made about how these characters feel and think about one another in either their larger context or in the immediate context of the hotel lobby.

The point is that the actors themselves have little to base these supposedly deep-rooted emotional ties on. The result, then, is that in an 'emotionally-charged' scene such as the parting of one long-time resident, the gestures conveyed, the words spoken, and the response suggested do not correlate. And it is not simply a matter of insincere gesture—the actors at least attempt to play the scene with something approaching genuine feeling—it is that the audience cannot be expected to sympathize, empathize, or even understand intellectually, why this person's parting would have so great an impact.

Much of the reason for such poor objective correlative is the structure of Hot I itself. Playwright Lanford Wilson has in effect limited himself to dealing with caricatures, people whose importance is in relation not to each other or themselves, but to the play's unstated theme. "I thought at least one of us would remember Old Granger," says an old woman towards the end of the third act, a comment which, taken together with the stated dreams of riding the trains and of owning farmland, point to a fairly obvious interpretation of the play. Unfortunately, this idea is dealt with in a rapid, tidy fashion, which comes far too late to make the play appealing. Wilson's char-

acters, crammed into one another's spaces and stories, are given little chance to display anything even approaching charm, anything even suggestive of dramatic relevance.

A bit of tension may be thrown in now and again, usually in the form of someone looking for someone, but these moments are swept aside beneath a tide of tedious dialogue and unbearably long stretches during which nothing happens on the surface or beneath the surface. Fully realized, Chekhov is never dull or slow, never anything less than charming and emptying at the same time. It is doubtful whether, even fully realized, Wilson could achieve this.

Director Gregg's stated aim, then, of exploring character, is negated from the first by a script which hesitates to explore even caricature. But not all the blame lies with the script. Gregg has spoken of the sense of urgency surrounding the closing of the hotel. The only sense of urgency in the entire production comes in the opening few minutes and during one or two choral moments. Incredibly, the actual point at which the closing-announcement is made is passed over with such marked indifference that not only is the moment lost, the whole point is lost. The character's don't seem to do anything out of a sense of urgency, because there is no such sense. In fact, just why they do anything at all is a mystery, literally, because even a sense of action arising from boredom is not conveyed.

Many of the actors walk around in a kind of void, not seeming to know or care what their

role in all of this is. There are perhaps three levels to the characters: those who blend into the background, those who seem to be most aware of their environment, and those who fit somewhere in between. But the actors as a whole don't appear to rise above the mold that has been set by their dialogue, and the most memorable performances are turned in by those who simply underplay their role—a welcome relief.

Regarding the sets and costumes—student production or no, there is something particularly aggravating about seeing 20-year-olds made up to play septuagenarians. In a play with a natural setting, it is unrealistic and not credible. Obviously, the suggestion here is not that actors not be challenged on a physiological basis, but there are limits at which our suspended disbelief begins to reassert itself. And the costumes seem no more than a mish-mash collected from basements and attics, which is likely true, but not necessary to make obvious.

Some good work has been made of the set, although the effect is not particularly that of a run-down hotel, and we have to wonder why a neon sign faces inside the lobby rather than the other way about. The main problem with the set is one this production team cannot be faulted with, but one which should at least have been taken more into account. Many scenes are played sitting down at the right side of the stage. This excludes a good portion of the audience, who needn't bother even craning to see. Unfortunately, since what is being heard isn't exactly shattering.

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