

Audience unappreciative of Guthrie company efforts

By Charlie Krig

A quintet of thespians braved a tough script and an unresponsive audience Monday night in Kimball Recital Hall. The Guthrie Theatre company brought its production of Eugene O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten* to Lincoln and the admirable effort deserved more from the full house.

theater review

This play is a deep, brooding composition, as is most of O'Neill's work, containing liberal amounts of the playwright's background and family life. To be exact, *Moon* largely is based on O'Neill's brother Jamie (obviously the character in the show called James Tyrone, Jr.). Those familiar with O'Neill recognize his autobiographical writing in this play and catch the references to his other works, particularly *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

The reason these elements relate and rely strongly on each other is O'Neill's morose nature while writing these plays. A fine production of one of his works brings out the torment the playwright felt and provides for the cathartic endings enabling the characters to survive in spite of nagging fears and frustrations.

The Guthrie production brought these characters to life. Their pain, hopes, ambitions and anxieties were fleshed out in engaging performances by every cast member. Richard Russel Ramos was flawless as the abusive father, Phil Hogan. The intolerable braggart lies about or criticizes every subject beyond his grasp: his daughter's control over him, the rich neighbors who he will never equal, his dead wife's religious zeal and his son's rejection of his hard-handed authoritarianism. He is a coward who hides behind a facade of false bravado.

Sharon Ernster (as Hogan's daughter, Josie) and Peter Michael Goetz (as James Tyrone, Jr., Hogan's landlord) acted well together. Ernster balanced carefully on the fine line between Josie's realistic nature and cynical outlook; Goetz was the errant playboy wasting his money and time on whores, whiskey and a mediocre acting career. Ernster

gave Goetz the compassion and attention his fragile character required and Goetz offered Ernster a pushy, insecure young man to mother.

The other actors, Peter Aylward as Josie's brother and Guy Paul as Hogan's rich neighbor, were more memorable for their work with their small parts. Aylward set the humorous tone of the play with a believable characterization and Paul enriched the comical progression with an engaging portrayal of a typically pompous ass. However, they did not appear on stage for some well-deserved applause during the curtain call.

Certain audience members, on the other hand, apparently could not appreciate the effort devoted to this show. O'Neill is a profound writer who demands attention and thought from the reader or listener, elements some people refused to invest in the show. Instead, there was a barrage of shuffling feet and enough coughing to fill a year of Vicks Formula 44 commercials. Their reasons for attending must have been to visit with friends or sip sodas during intermission rather than trying to discover the play's subtleties.

The disruptions could be attributed to several causes: the audience couldn't rationalize the black humor and the serious parts, some of O'Neill's lengthy monologues were too indulgent or the warm, stuffy theater lulled people to distraction.

But for whatever reason, the company did not receive consideration equal to the success of its task. O'Neill was an abstruse playwright and the Guthrie Company presented a skilled interpretation of one of his complicated plays.

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