By CLINT GOODSON

Tiny Alice: a mesmeric tissue of appearances. When it opened in New York in 1964, it was both praised and maligned, always dismissed as incomprehensible. The Rice Players have nevertheless (or perhaps because of this) undertaken to perform it in the hothouses, and they have once again come off rather well.

The Players have a history of involvement with Albee; they produced "The American Dream" in 1963 and "The Zoo Story" last year. This play makes an interesting contrast with its predecessor, for the first time language is more than a barrier to communication. It is the primal generator of the self-proclaimed "human condition," the block to man's understanding of himself.

The situation of the play is deceptively simple. A Cardinal, wishing a huge donation for the church, sells his secretary, Brother Julian, to the wealthy Miss Alice through the agency of a Mephistophelian lawyer. Julian is thus placed in the role of a martyr, a role to which he readily adapts.

Julian Deserted

He subsequently marries Miss Alice, only to find that she must desert him—along with his Cardinal, the Lawyer, and his wife's Butler. They are mere apparitions, agents of a cosmic power which they cannot explain. Left entirely alone, he appeals to his abstract belief in some meaning, and Tiny Alice answers him from the modul castle at midstage as he dies.

The play presents, then, Julian's attempt to find meaning by projection onto various conventional reality structures—notably the church and standard-received love. The failure of this attempt is not Julian's alone, but that of man, the symbol-making animal. Which is to say that "Tiny Alice" is a brilliant mime.

When these reality structures reveal themselves as transparent tissue, Julian is left absolutely alone, and he finds meaning only in his faith in the existence of some undefined level of meaning. Tiny Alice acknowledges this conviction, but she leaves the essential enigma unanswered.

Elaborate Symbol

Symbol is appropriately elevated in this play, and it dissolves appropriately under traditional critical approaches. The words don't lead to "the meaning"—they are, in the very most McLuhanesque sense, the meaning itself, which in their case is non-meaning. Words cannot convey God; they cannot materialize Tiny Alice.

The act of sexing defiles her; Miss Alice, the human analog of Tiny Alice, is sheer appearance. To verbalize is to submit to structure, to destroy the possibility of meaning.

Acting Uneven

Acting in "Tiny Alice" was comparable to that in the earlier Player production of "The Birthday Party." The performances, if uneven, were exceptionally strong at critical confrontations.

Leaving the cast as Brother Julian was Thom Scratchin. He played the secretary as a devoted cleric who hesitantly cast doubt on his reality structure. Despondent and alone after his desertion, Scratchin delivered the closing monolog, Julian's final search for abstract meaning, with admirable understanding.

He was also convincing in his awkward introduction to Miss Alice. But his performance dragged badly in parts of the second act, and he was never really adequate in his conversations with his Lawyer.

This Lawyer, as played by Bennett Falk, was a manipulator without scruples, developing the situation that eventually martyrs Julian. Falk played him effectively, so to the point of stereotype. He was adequate, however, in the crucial scenes.

And More Actors

Miss Alice was played with elan by Connie Brown. Her performance as the seductive agent of Tiny Alice was exceptionally strong, even sparkling in spots. She was especially good in the initial scenes with Julian in which she transforms his devotions from the church to herself.

Jack Egan, as the Butler, was the most convincing actor in the production. As ritual perpetrator of appearances, he summoned and shielded reality like a Shakespearean clown. Joe Caruthers was adequate but undistinguished as the hypocritical Cardinal.

"Tiny Alice" is a strictly contemporary play. Its tone is like that of "Strawberry Fields Forever." Its word plays are descendents of the Theater of the Absurd, and its fabric of word context is straight out of Samuel Beckett. It is an unusually worthwhile play and the Players' interpretation is its equal.