Dirty Work at the Crossroads

By CLINT GOODSON

Theater IV has deserted local theatrical propriety by producing a genuine melodrama; not the concealed type so often misrepresented to the theater-going public as legitimate theater, but a conscious variety entitled, frankly, "Dirty Work at the Crossroads."

If melodrama is your own favorite variety of camp, this production should provide an evening of ecstasy. Otherwise, you might enjoy a "Batman" flick at the Alvar better. In spite of a plot of epic dimensions and a cast full of archetypal heroines, cads, and rogues, the play falls flat; this is due more to poor acting than to its distempered length.

Basically, the story revolves around a pastoral lass named Nellie. It seems that she and the local blacksmith's son, Adam Oakhart have been engaged since childhood, Nellie's widowed mother approves of this match, and will sign the deed to the family farm over to the couple after they are married. Fortune hunter Monroe Murgatroyd, fully realizing the economic potential of the farm (the railroad is willing to pay a fortune for it, of course), decides to woo Nellie away from her blacksmith.

How? Monroe's wife and sometime companion, the lusty and experienced Ida Rheingold, lures young Adam into a compromising position before Nellie's prying eyes; her mother is poisoned by Monroe; and she is fervently courted by the busy villain. To no avail, however, is Monroe's work, for through a circumstance ... and this type of plot contrivance continues ad nauseam.

The finest scene in the production is the last one, which sees, to nobody's surprise, a complete resolution through a chain of events that is amusing even at this stage of the show. Perhaps the play's most gratifying dramatic element is the emergence of Ida Rheingold as a respectable prostitute, and it is she who ultimately saves the day.

Cindy Seixas, who plays Nellie, does the best acting job in the play. Her expressions are precisely those of Little Annie Fanny; she is a native, pristine, and convincing heroine. Dick Holland, as Monroe, and Pam McCormick, as Ida, also turn in creditable performances. After these, however, the acting falls to amateur standards. Lines are muffed and the blocking, admittedly problematical for a cabaret type theater, is sub-par.

Fortunately, audience participation helps to cover the play's inadequacies, and the management encourages hissing and cheering. The question is who to hiss. Monroe Murgatroyd is far more appealing than Adam, and Nellie is probably a little too close to home for most of the men of Rice. TRG's, on the other hand, might identify with her.

For the drama buff who is tired of a steady diet of O'Neill, Miller, Williams, and Albee, "Dirty Work at the Crossroads" might prove an enchanting evening; but I doubt it. Anyway, who in Houston could possibly be tired of such a diet?