PLAYS BY FEIFFER, ALBEE

Faulty Writing Mars Fine Acting At Arts Museum

By JOEL HOCHMAN

The Contemporary Arts Museum is presenting, through February 16, two contemporary American plays. The first of these plays is the first dramatic effort of Jules Feiffer, the well-known cartoonist-satirist, entitled "Crawling Arnold."

The other work is by Edward Albee and is entitled "The American Dream." Mr. Albee is known to Houston audiences from several productions of his work "Zoo Story."

MR. FEIFFER'S play demonstrates most of the characteristics of his cartooning. It occasionally places our collective social skin to touch painfully and hilariously the soft spots in our pseudo-psycho-sophisticated and scientific society.

But at other times the play demonstrates the result of an over-extension of cleverness. For when Mr. Feiffer pushes his insight, it often degenerates into a snide snickering that is no longer a parody of pseudo-erudition but pseudo itself.

However, true devotees of Mr. Feiffer's cartooning forgive him his mortality and seek the wheat in the India ink chaff. His play requires the same kind of charity.

"CRAWLING ARNOLD" is beautifully executed under the direction of Ned Bobhoff and with the talents of a gifted cast. Especially impressive is Jim Bernhard, who manages to capture Arnold in all his creeping caricature. It is difficult to maintain a parody without slipping into a satire of the parody itself. But the entire cast overcomes this difficulty and molds into the Feiffer world with graceful ease.

"The American Dream" has the same quality of presentation. The direction is very capable, as is the cast, and the play is adequately complete in its roles. The play has many very amusing lines and is obviously intelligent throughout. Its main difficulty is that Mr. Albee is not a playwright.

THE TROUBLE IS that "The American Dream" is simply a long series (I emphasize long) of cynicism. It parodies literally dozens of social institutions, but the parodies simply do not coalesce into a unified structure. One is left with the feeling that Mr. Albee dislikes and is dissatisfied with a multitude of things, but is utterly without a view of his own.

He has the wit to relate skillfully a good part of the obvious nonsense that permeates our society. But he hasn't the capacity to make this subject matter into anything of importance.

ALBEE LACKS the tools to sew a form out of lumber of his witicism. This is obvious when he attempts, in one long monologue, to relate all the comedy to a serious theme of insufficiency and social cruelty. The result is an effusive catalogue of emotions that is at best embarrassing and at worst a painful bore. This same kind of crude technique demonstrates the lead character of "Zoo Story" — whose final monologue must be the Platonic Form of beat booby.

The merit of this CAA production lies primarily in the participation and secondarily in the wonders of Feiffer's mind. If one is a fan of acting excellence and sick comedy, the evening will be two hours of satisfaction.