Presentational ‘J. B’ Impresses Audiences
By LINDA WALSH

Presentational theater, that ancient art worthy of being drawn by Aeschylus and Shakespeare, is at last being renovated by modern dramatists and directors for a public weary of pseudo-Ibsenism. “J. B.”, performed last week by the Rice Players, was successful because it “presented” and did not “represent” man’s search for meaning.

“J. B.” audiences held mixed reactions and interpretations, but none who saw the play could deny that it was a successful compliment for the Players, and that it introduced an interesting new face for theater as a medium. Directing and designing and director and designer Joseph K. Rieder created an excellent production of Archibald MacLeish’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play.

LIFE IS A spinning joke, a top on a dung heap. One can find purpose in its seeming meaningless self-justification for his existence—love in his pail of excrement. The man whose “lucky story” twists into tragedy, J. B., has to question himself and his God, make no contact with humanity, or “drown in ordure.”

J.B. and Sarah, their children and their lives, are shattered and broken by Fortune’s cruel impartiality. A previously overly-pious Sarah chooses to “curse and die,” rather than stay with her husband, who remains “groveling in the revolving excrement, eating and vomitting, a man of man and regeneration, not for love of existence and God.

When J.B., at last begins to question existence, he realizes that the true comfort of his despair is not the twisted words of science, religion, or any “—ism,” it is the gift of misery not his own. The old woman who gave her misery to keep (him) warm” made him transcend self and make contact with humanity.

SATAN DOES NOT believe Job could bear to live after his suffering: “To take up planting the world again—Job could not bear it twice over.” But God reminds him, “I will turn over, every generation.” J.B. vows, “but he slay me, yet I will trust in him, yet I will maintain mine own ways before him. Pen him just as long or more so than the play itself were the technical aspects. Director Dannenbaum explains, “We were after theatricality, playability...perhaps Americans are getting so tired of realist stage that they are desiring a stage that puts more of the actor in the audience.”

In presentational theater, the actor, not the set designer, sets the time and place. Mr. Rider seated the audience in a circus tent where they watched a three-ring show, heaven and hell to stage left and right and earth in the center ring. Using the three-ring bath as the backdrop and the viewer’s imagination as the curtain, he constructed a marvelously

ly sturdy and effective arena.

Movement in this arena was excellent in its flow and variety. Mike Cox (Nickles) had the best command of the space and form of the stage. Claudie Pettigrew (Sarah) did some very professional upstaging that was the primary marring factor in an otherwise good performance. Mike Cooper. (Second Roustabout) however, used a too dramatic posture and gave little expression to some very rich language.

THE ACTING was, on the whole, quite polished and effective. Mike Holmes was very good as J.B., struggling at times with inadequate dialogue and an acting role, yet giving an admirable interpretation. All worked well together and compensated for a few weak spots with some outstanding performances.

LIGHTING AND SOUND, although very good, did not quite reach the level of the movement. Too often were eyes and facial expressions poorly illustrated for no apparent reason, and there seemed to be too much unnecessary volume. Because we were without light, we had to rely on voices for the main medium of expression. From the beginning, the vocal level was so high that it often strained itself in attempting to reach an apogee.

Presentational theater was hard for many “J.B.” viewers to accept because it is new to the modern public and it demands so much of an audience. This should however, stimulate both spectator and Player to demand more such productions and further experimentation. “J.B.” is a hard act to follow.