Two Productions Entertain Houstonians

By JOEL HOCHMAN

Houston's theater circuit recently provided two unusual offerings to the local populace. The Playhouse Theater is the site of a delightful work called "Fantasticks," still running; and the Alley Theater recently gave its last performance of "Garden Spot, U.S.A." by George Garrett, visiting lecturer in English at Rice.

"Fantasticks," a musical by Tom Jones and Harvey Schmidt, is a rare example of the best features of contemporary theater techniques combined with unusual wit. The play manages to utilize nearly every cliche of the avant garde in a working satire of those very techniques, while all the while wonderfully confronting the viewer with the foibles of men and their institutions.

DEVICES such as the narrator, in-the-round presentation, a mute stagehand, all complement the fantastic mood of this confrontation, which unconventionally examines the conventional in songs like "Metaphor," "It Depends on What You Pay," and "The Rape Ballet."

The musical is divided into two acts. Each completely envelopes the audience in its particular attitude toward love. The attitudes are diametrically opposed romanticism and realism, although the limitations of these categories is an unfair constriction of the actual presentation.

IN THE OPPOSITION and the distance which the techniques provide one comes away with the feeling that a person of real insight has been leading an amazingly entertaining two hour chase. This feeling is reinforced by the polish of a professional cast of sound ability and experience.

"Garden Spot, U.S.A.," was an entirely different kind of opportunity. Speaking first to the inhabitants of the Rice U. world, it was an unusual chance to view the product of a creative process that occurred during a school year and in and around the campus.

THIS IN itself was an overwhelmingly unique event. But speaking also to the urban Other outside the walls, the show provided a view of the positive and negative features of a first play.

On the positive side "Garden Spot" retains the vitality and humor of a playwright contemporarily writing and living. Thus it avoided a formality that often occurs when a playwright's success ages into a formula for presentation and attitudes (O'Neill's psychology, Brecht's sociology).

MR. GARRETT looks at the present from an obviously experimental point of view and the results are fresh. Additionally, his humor revolves around situations and is related in modes in which we daily participate.

Thus, for instance, when he simultaneously stages a minister, a politician, a club woman, and a banker in opposition to each other, we immediately recognize their points of view from the text of our own experience. Their continual reductio ad absurdum thus leads us to the grand absurdities of the play, our experience, and our U.S.A., Garden Spot.

On the negative side Mr. Garrett's first play has obvious technical difficulties. The first act drags on through an over-extended series of cliches which introduce the various social types. The result is a feeling that someone's cleverness got spread a little too thin.

THIS PROBLEM of cleverness occurs again when the humor leans toward the obvious: sight gags, statements in character. It sometimes appears that the temptation to pile jokes on the implicitly absurd is too strong for... (Continued on Page 12)
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the playwright to resist.

This problem might easily be solved by noting that understate- ment magnifies and overstate- ment smothers. If this tendency to the crime of the heavy hand can be tempered, the play, as well as future works, will benefit exponentially.

On the whole, “Garden Spot” is an opportunity for a lesson in the contemporary and vital, a promising and entertaining alleg- ory on the people and their threats and menaces, private and public.