Telemachus: experimental form captures pop audience

By CLINT GOODSON

The popular theater is noted for its artistic conservatism. Only after lengthy exposure and promotion in avant-garde dramatic circles can innovations and new techniques in the drama be performed profitably in pop-oriented playhouses, which cater to a broad, paying public—one that is traditionally narrow-minded in its conception of dramatic purpose.

Telemachus Clay, produced last week by the Rice Players, introduced a new experimental form to an audience that must be regarded as a fundamentally popular one. Yet this new method of presentation was immediately attractive and engaging—not just to a few, but judging from responses, to the great majority of the audience. Here, it seemed, a playwright had successfully captured a pop-audience.

Successful Innovations

And, indeed, if John Carlino's play, which is described as "a collage for sounds and voices," is to be judged merely by its formal innovations in the drama, it must be considered a success. The play relies extensively on imaginative light techniques and shadow casting as well as on expressionistic sound effects; these create a mood instantly, and the playwright correlates the speech accordingly.

The actors sit, stationary, on stools lined up across the stage, and they communicate through the audience instead of directly among themselves. Their language is quasi-poetic, coarse in a familiar sense, often a disturbing combination of the two.

Yet a play is more than its form, regardless of its inventiveness; and 'Telemachus Clay' fails because its content cannot measure up. This play is nothing short of melodrama, produced in exciting psychological depth, but failing, inevitably, to escape its shaky foundations.

Not that the production was unenjoyable; on the contrary, Neil Havens directed a student cast, better than most local professionals, in a dazzling admixture of life.

The light patterns and sound effects, well placed and equally well executed, fused Carlino's work into a playable artifice. Yet, 'Telemachus Clay' was hopelessly mauldin; the story it tells is, unfortunately, responsible for this effect.

Its plot is simple—Telemachus Clay, small-town poet and bastard son of an unknown sire, goes to Hollywood to sell his movie script. He fails to fit into Hollywood society and decides to drift until he finds an Identity. In order to make the story a never-ending allegory of life, Carlino introduces Telemachus' back-home lover Barbara, who bears his bastard son while he is on the road. And, of course, Tel never returns; the play ends with the death of his own unknown father.

Evocative Staging

Were it not for the effects made possible by its evocative staging, the play would descend to the level of the Late Movie—like father, like son. Fortunately for the Rice audience, the Players made this a lesson in dramatic production, and the collage technique emerged reasonably unscathed.

All but two of the actors assumed many different roles. And these parts were not always human; billboards, cows, and a python were among the characters. Telemachus remained the central figure throughout the production, always at the heart of the action; the lack of any sort of sub-plot made the play easy to follow, no small task for a playwright utilizing Carlino's techniques.

Parsons As Poet

Joe Parsons played Telemachus as a hopeful poet, running scared from his background, but failing to gain acceptance by the Hollywood in-crowd. Parsons can hardly be blamed for Carlino's basically cardboard character; Telemachus, fundamentally searching for Identity, fails to escape the bane of the overly general.

Outside of Tel himself, the Prophet was the production's most interesting and significant character. He is the creator of popular culture, the arbitrary delineator of fads, the essence of pop conformity. If Tel cannot dance to his song, he cannot fit into Hollywood society; this is ultimately a game played by rules that are dictated by the Prophet.

Memorable Scene

Cal Thorpe, the Prophet's dogmatic chant in the second part of the play, is the most memorable scene in the production, and the most significant.

Both among the actors cast in many roles were Fred Roberts, Mary Strouzier, and Linda Walsh. Roberts, who played fifteen different parts, managed to keep from establishing a personal aura around each; he changed accent frequently, with considerable success.

The unfortunate mother of Telemachus was one of the several parts read by Mary Strouzier. This portrayal was especially striking and was played, very well, to its emotional tilt. Linda Walsh was assigned a number of roles that required sensual treatment; she was best in her initial, simple role of Suebelle, the sexually insipid child.

Several actors were severely limited by the stereo-typed nature of their primary roles. Beverly Welking, who was Barbara, Tel's home-town flame for most of the play, was especially victim to this; the role was simply too lachrymose to be taken seriously. The part of an oft-cuckolded but good-sport producer, molded out of pure Schmaltz, was given a noble effort by Roger Glade. In both of these instances, the actor involved did a fine job in the face of artistic drivel. Each was effective in the other roles assigned him.

Remarkable Salvage

Bob Sculley, Naomi Morehead, Gil Dawson, and Joe Caruthers rounded out the cast with generally good performances. This entire group of actors did, in fact, a remarkable job of salvaging what might have been a dramatic disaster.

The sad quality of this play was particularly lamentable in view of the production itself. Perhaps Carlino's is as yet the best attempt with the new techniques; it is, more likely, a representative one. At least the Players are aware of new trends and are attempting to give them popular exposure. Neil Havens especially deserves credit for making an ultimately worthwhile performance out of a work of little dramatic merit.

Avant-garde

This is not to discourage the Players from performing the avant-garde, but rather to avoid praising every new technique simply because it is different. The spirit of experiment is obviously present among this group. They will, hopefully, choose to continue the trend they have established this year of producing predominantly modern drama.