"First and last good Alley product, "Physicists' above all a comic play"

BY CLINT GOODSON

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For the first time this season, the Alley Theatre has relaxed the rigid demands that it makes on the drama it produces; the result is a good play, the first and last of the season, and one worth seeing in spite of the usual mediocrite acting at the venerable establishment for the Establishment.

"The Physicists" is, in a way, a didactic play. Written by the eminent Swiss playwright Friedrich Duerrenmatt, it points to the moral responsibility of the individual for his acts. The play is aimed overtly at modern science, and to the extent that it urges the modern physicist to consider the implications of his discoveries, it preaches.

But the play is not didactic in the same social sense as, say, Bertolt Brecht. It probes deeply the nature of reality; as Duerrenmatt says in his "Points to 'The Physicists'," "Within the paradoxical appears reality." The search in the play is not just that of the three "mad" physicists for an ethic; it is, more importantly, man's search for reality.

Plot Simple

"The Physicists" can be confusing if approached in a conventional manner. Standardly received literary games won't uncover internal evidence for the absolute sanity of anybody in the play. At one time or another, every one of the incarcerat ed physicists appears to be sane; then he seems, paradoxically, to be insane again.

The plot of the play is disarmingly simple. There are three inmates in a very comfortable asylum, each of whom is a physicist and two of whom claim to be someone else. One thinks he is Albert Einstein and the other he that is Sir Isaac Newton. The third, Mobius, is something of a recluse.

In the course of their life at the asylum, each kills a nurse for no apparent reason. As it happens, the two who purport to be Einstein and Newton later claim to be perfectly sane physicists who have faked insanity in order to be near Mobius. They are agents of rival governments, and they believe that Mobius has made a discovery that is necessary to the interests of their own governments.

Subjectivity Central

Mobius claims sanity, too. He admits that he has made the discovery, but he refuses to transmit it because of its tactical value. He has faked insanity in order to avoid devastating mankind by the agency of his discovery. How, he asks his fellow inmates, do they know that their countries are capable of using his discovery to the benefit of mankind? They cannot, of course, answer rationally or prove their claims.

The other two physicists decide, finally, to remain isolated from society by living out their lives in the asylum, lest Mobius' discovery destroy mankind. This is the final commitment to subjectivity: nobody is right or knows what is right, and the only solution is isolation.

The Fraulein Doktor, who runs the asylum, seems to be necessary until the one other inmate, her sanity comes into serious question. The observer is left confused. If you are to believe the local reviewers and society columnists (the play is, in their own words, the talk of the town), "The Physicists" is a plot against the sanity of its audience.

Comic Play

Not so, however, if Duerrenmatt's own words just be heeded. All that is left at the end of the play is three physicists in an asylum—each claiming sanity and reciting a short autobiography in the manner of an automaton. This is the subjectivity of reality; it is, precisely, paradox that is reality.

"The Physicists" is, above all, a comic play. The unraveling of the appearances that cover reality is comic in its intense irony. But the subject is, needless to say, serious. Duerrenmatt is a master of this kind of drama and one of the best dramatists writing today in any manner.

The acting at the Alley tends to be stylized, and if this bothers you it can ruin a show. Joseph Ruskin turned in a realiy good performance as "Newton," but other performances, especially that of Virginia Payne, who played the Fraulein Doktor, were sub-par—not for the Alley, but for professional theatre. It's so seldom that any one in Houston sees high-quality professional theatre, however, that the inadequacies of individual performances are easily forgotten, especially in the face of a play as good as this one.