John Sumner's "Season"

Mr Patrick White has chosen to call "The Season at Sarsaparilla" a charade of suburbia in two acts. And Mr J. P. Donleavy, of New York, has called his four acts about his home town "fairy tales." Some day, when the cheering dies, perhaps a play will be a play again. But why a charade, a guessing game with acted clues? And what are we to make of "The Season at Sarsaparilla"? Love and squalor, with Brek?

I believe my disappointment is partly in the production, partly in the play. The play suffers, in my opinion, from the absence of dramatic progression. It makes instead a statement, an affirmation, about suburban life; and once this affirmation is grasped by the audience the way in which it is worked out fails to grip. This is not a mere matter of mechanics, as Brek suggested in his review of the Adelaide production when he commented on the redundancy of the commentary spoken by the schoolteacher/chorus Roy Child. Mr White's design is to show that behind their plastic and gadgety platitudes the dwellers in the serried rows of boxes are more "real" than the Roy Childs who mock them. It is argument by demonstration, and demonstration from incident. Judy Pogson throws up the pretensions of her ambition to become a great violinist and accepts the gauche advances of Ron Suddards, post office clerk. At the same time she shrewdly (or intuitively) recognises Roy Child, the cultural anthropologist and kitchen table writer, in his true colours. Mavis and Harry Knott share the joy of the birth of their first child. Girlie Pogson's mechanical regret for things past becomes, however slightly perceived, an
awareness of a void in present living. And Nola and Harry Boyle in the depths of their unhappiness and the heights of their elation provide final proof of Mildred Street’s capacity for living and feeling.

Mr. White brilliantly switches the action from one box to another. He has a marvellous capacity for changing the mood of the play in a moment from ludicrous to pathetic to scalding. In this respect he is not a skilled playwright. Yet he does not provide the necessary definition for the conclusions he invites us to draw about his characters. And in this respect the playwright is still the novelist, demonstrating from observation.

John Summer’s production, admirable in parts, repeats some of what are said to have been the faults in Adelaide. It would be untrue to say that it heartlessly solicits laughter at the expense of the characters, but the Knotts are still played as outer sitcom and Girile Pogson remains less a character than a humour. On a different level the performances of Reginald Livermore as Roy and Zoe Caldwell as Nola also give cause for concern. Mr. Livermore fits the part like a glove when acting within the frame of the play as a participant, but when he steps outside it as he compare the lines slip from his grasp, the poeticism of the purple passages eludes a definition. The mistake may have been Mr. White’s, as these passages are inclined to fly too high (even for Roy), but I found myself wondering how Mr. Livermore’s predecessor in the Union Company, Lewis Flander, would have managed them.

Miss Caldwell, on the other hand, is a little too large for the life of the play. As the warm, generous, vulgar slum mother, Nola, she just about acts the rest of the cast off the stage. Miss Cokerill is now an actress of extraordinary power and she possesses technical skills of the highest order. But to this part she brings tricks of speech which are not only annoying but artistically wrong. The habit was noticeable in “St. Joan,” where it was excusable on the ground that she was staging a scene with a change of the conception of the part. In the role of Nola it seemed to me that Miss Caldwell was allowed by the producer to show off. To their credit Stewart Weller (Rowley Masson) and John Gray (Ernie) do not become involved in this high flying. Their style of acting is simple, naturalistic and effective. In smaller parts Lyndis Love (Lily), Dennis Miller (Ron) and Michael Duffield (Clive Pogson) are excellent.

J. P. Donleavy’s New York charade is more explicit in its clues, as Mr. Donleavy has given each of the four acts a name. It is the record of the progress of an innocent, home from abroad. Cornelius Christian is his name: everybody’s fall guy is the solution to the charade. But Miss Lola Russell’s production at the Russell is no charade, and the writer tries hard to make this clarsity exercise interesting, but without conspicuous success.

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