THEATRE

Patrick White is a Born Playwright

PLAY: Season at
Sarsaparilla

Union

After a long wait it has been left to the Union Repertory company to bring us Patrick White as a playwright, and after Tuesday night I have no doubt that the title is his by right.

This is not a nice play and it is not intended to be. It is written looking down, as White sometimes - too often - into disgust, but sometimes into pity, and sometimes into a kind of dusty, suburban poetry.

Like White's novels, it is white hot with feeling and raises more questions than it can answer. But for all its dramatic flaws, I think there are several, it is the work of a born playwright.

No one else could command such a range of effects, switching from burlesque to realism from public patches to knockabout comedy, from satire to sermon in a sentence or two.

Complexities

The sharp discipline of the stage has forced White to restrain his tendency to overwite, like a sculptor cutting away with a chisel. His most successful characters are his simplest. It is only in his the more complex figures that he fails to carry conviction. This is perhaps because the structure of the play is itself so complex that it cannot rest and develop individual characters. The set is three identical houses in a graceless outer suburb of Sydney, tenanted by three huddled families who pop in and out of doors, climb over each other's fences and interrupt each other's dialogue in a kind of jazzy orchestration.

Socially, they are muddled, too mixed to be believed; a business executive, a young man "in men's wear" and a sandy worker represent the outer fringe. Other characters drift in and out to complicate the pattern. There is also a pack of dogs off-stage, adding a note of symbolism which I found confusing. Mr. White has plenty of themmies in this play: the stultifying effect of life in what he calls "boxes." The false values, social snobbery, monotony, boredom, and essential loneliness of his cramped and huddled characters.

Comparisons spring to the mind: one might mention Our Town or Uncle Milly Wood. White calls the play "a charade of suburbia" to indicate that its subject is not any particular character, but the pattern of lives who form part of a street and a social setting.

John Sumner's direction is theatrically effective, particularly in its rapid changes of tempo between the jerky clockwork of the stylized satire and the tightly breathing of the emotional scenes. If it labors the distasteful subject of sexual curiosity, it cannot be blamed, the author has played it with a kind of fascinated revulsion, at the expense of his other themes.

Zoe Caldwell seems at first miscast as the plump, unfledged wife of a nightman but her magic works, and she raises the slatternly matron to a genuinely moving climax.

Michael Duffield, Bunney Brooke, John Gray, Stewart Weller, Charles Haggith and Marion Edward seem to match the author's intentions precisely, although the cast becomes a tidy puzzle among some of the less fully realised characters.

A functional set by Anne Fraser packs this bulging bushy plot into the small Union stage, and there is no doubt about the effectiveness of the production.

- GEOFFREY HUTTON.