The Hostage satirizes modern life in Ireland

By Joseph C. Lambert

Brendan Behan's "The Hostage," now being produced at the Charles Playhouse, is probably one of the most amazing plays to emerge from any modern author. It is, in a word, hilarious - it is not profound.

The action of the play centers around a boarding house in the slums of modern Dublin. The plot is a bit ridiculous: there has been a modern reenactment of the I.R.A., and a young member of this group has shot a policeman. Naturally he is apprehended and sentenced to death, so the I.R.A. seizes an English soldier as a hostage for the return of their "trick patron." It is not the situation, however, that lends the comic aspects to the play; it is the occupants of the boarding house.

These occupants are perhaps the most morbid assembly ever to live under the same roof. They include the protagonist, an I.R.A. soldier-turned-coward in the 1916 uprising, perhaps the only recognizable type and the only reasonable person in the play. His counterpart is his wife, who is notable for such lines as "Well, I might be a whore, but you take most of my money, and that makes you a pauper!" ("I'm sick of it, or are you sick of me?"")

Other characters in the boarding house are a slut, a Russian sailor, a homosexual, a Negro American boxer, an Englishman who is convinced that he is Irish (consequently he speaks Gaelic and wears a kilt and plays a bagpipe), a piano player, an old woman who is completely dedicated to a pet doll, a helpless weak individual, and a free-thinking, sociable person.

There is also a maid, an I.R.A. officer, a guard, and the hostage. The play itself is a satire on all phases of modern life. When the hostage, a Rio Rita, enters with the Negro and runs up the stairs, he is asked, "Where's he?"

He answers, "Oh, he's my long lost brother from America." And the Negro contributes, "Yeah, I'm a refugee from Ole Miss!"

When the plot brings the Russian sailor to her room, the old man complains that he is a Communist and that furthermore he has no money. There's no time for a chase ending with the Russian throwing tremendous amounts of money into the air.

Basically the play has no deep significance, it is excellent comedy with very few weak points, and is almost a must for any lover of satire and the modern stage. An evening at the Charles Playhouse watching "The Hostage" is more than magnificently entertaining!