Dramashop's 9-day wonder

By Robert Fowser

Only halfway through the fall term, Dramashop has already presented as much as with two of its shows scheduled for the end of the term and a third yet to come.

The second of these pairs of one-acts, presented in Klege Theater last weekend, followed the programming of the first to start off, a moderately assured play, posting an exciting situation and proceeding only half-heartedly along the path of conventional narrative drama; to close the evening, a realistic mini-drama in a recognizable setting.

Airball's "The Labyrinth," the entire time around, takes place at a clearing in an immense labyrinth of East Campus gray bulbs (arranged for the occasion by Bruce Schwartz). The labyrinth's occupants, it develops, are mostly prisoners left to wander through its blankets forever with only a chance of finding their way out; their oppressors are the owner of the complex, his scatterbrained daughter, and a strange system of courts which travels through the maze.

It takes no great insight to see that "The Labyrinth" was meant as a parody of a sort of bureaucratic justice; the audience caught the fact pretty fast. Unfortunately, the play left more than a few blank cards in the box. The absurdly confounded wonder, wondering what all the stage and varied goings-on supposed to mean. It seems this sort of problem always accompanies this sort of play -- the audience feels impelled to perform a textual analysis that they would find difficult with the script before them and a week's free time. This sort of attention is better devoted to works that are meant to be read -- Kafka's novels, on much the same topic, make much more profitable and enjoyable analyses.

The play, however, is for performance in a theater, and it ought to keep the audience sufficiently engrossed that no one stops to think what it is about. Any other significance of words or situations must be conveyed through characterization of the roles and staging. This is the challenge of any play, but here the task is complicated by an unnatural situation and unfamiliar characters. It is often necessary to overplay the parts, giving the characters a wealth of conventional mannerisms to make them real; an elaborate production often helps. (one full length play along similar lines is de Chedder's "Pernoelot," which employed the entire breadth and depth of a Broadway stage in a successful production four years ago).

One cannot fairly demand too much of director Jeffrey Melan, who had only a cramped stage and nine days to work with. Still, only Leslie Haws as James Haws, a crotchety old footman who cannot understand his mistress' constant complaining of her late unfaithful husband, did anything in the show. (across the board, performances were adequately heard, but numbers were not)... Still, the only thing the audience was ever supposed to think was how good the performances were. (across the board, performances were adequately heard, but numbers were not)

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