Review

Kennedy's Children: Visions of Camelot

Kennedy's Children

Walter Kerr Theater through Oct. 25

Kennedy's Children is a play based on a theme previously constructed and told. Five people come into a bar in Greenwich Village and at 2:00 hours talk to the audience, but not to each other. This unusual technique provides the basis for one of the most thought-provoking shows on the legitimate stage in recent years. When the play opens, Wanda, a black substitute teacher, is sitting in the bar and talking to herself. The manager, John F. Kennedy. She is played expressively by Barbara Merry, who won an Obie award for her acting in 1974. The barman, who stands behind the bar is Sparger, a thithy author whose life centers around the off-off-Broadway, shows he acts in, directs, or produces. Sparger is played by Donald Parker, who took the role in both the off-Broadway and London productions.

Mark, the next person to come into the bar, is a Vietnamese veteran who befriended at nights by his three fellow Iraqis, which he must kill the next day. Ron, his best friend, 20's follows him in, and spends the evening reviewing the life she and her heroine, a Jewish-Arab husband lived in the sixties. The setting is roundly out by Shirley Knight, who plays Carla. Her greatest ambition in life is to become another Marilyn Monroe.

Kennedy's Children is the story of the Sixties, the Kennedy era, as seen through the eyes and monologues of these five people. No topic is sacred, nothing is "too hot to handle." Mark talks about his paranoia, which led to the murder of his best friend. Carla talks about her romps on the casting couch and her days as a go-go girl without self pity; and when she announces near the end of becoming a clown. The evening follows seven-four seventy sleeping pills, the audience knows every step of her left-handed method to suicide.

Ron's first statement includes the fact that she comes into the bar to pick up black boys because "there are so few straight white boys today." And she gives the audience a behind the scenes look of the college fraternities, the intimate feeling of living with the people in their social positions and bodies to other, who in return would agree to turn on LBJ. But by the first fascinating view of life is given to us by Sparger. He is an outlaw from "straight middle class society" as a proud homosexual who realized his addiction to theater, and who also knows that his "artistic license" is a sham and an act.

Kennedy's Children is not cut entertainment. It is impossible to just sit and watch it; each person in the theater is totally involved. The problems the characters face in their lives are our problems today too. We share with them the challenges of life and the desire to retreat to the simpler, purer days when Jack and Jackie reigned over a happy America.

The unique content of the show demands special treatment from the audience. Each character becomes a special aim, and is closed in a personal unreachable space. Whether cured up on the dance floor, or standing on a table shouting in euphoria, none of the characters ever interact with each other except through the connections their messages make in our minds.

Kennedy's Children originally opened in a small off-Broadway theater in 1963, but soon closed. For several years, the play was dormant, until a London producer decided to take the risk of backing a show with no personal communication. The show opened to good notices in England and is scheduled to open on Broadway in early November.

The Broadway board version incorporates two effects which would be difficult to do anywhere else but a large theater. The set is a perfect reproduction of a bar, down to the lights on the juke box and the beer sign in the window. And the lighting, although slightly repetitious after a while, manages to pinpoint each character and adds effectively to the feeling of isolation basic to the show.

Kennedy's Children is a play to see. It appeals to the intellect within one, as well as the passion. Even more important, it allows the audience to see what has happened to their lives and to the lives of others since the Kennedy era, and points up the search for personal happiness upon which we all embark.