

By TOM TITUS  
Of the Daily Pilot Staff

Over the past year and a half, the most imaginative theater in Orange County has been the sporadic but solidly innovative Open End Theater of Newport-Beach.

"What If?" is a one-of-a-kind production which will change at least 75 percent each night because it is almost wholly dependent on the whim of its audience to propel it in whatever direction it chooses to take. It is partly topical satire, but primarily an evening of improvisational theater, testing the mental mettle of its 11-member company.

As such, it is as changeable as the weather. Just how changeable is demonstrated in an exercise which divides the company into teams of three members each, "winging it" through one off the cuff situation after another with three playgoers signaling transition at random.

This is probably the least successful portion of the show in terms of effect, but it serves a commendable purpose, demonstrating the skills of the cast members, singly and in concert, to pick up on the loose thread of a stray idea and weave it into a full blown situation.

Director Deacon is narrator, and/or moderator for the program and his unprepossessing, this-may-or-may-not-work approach strikes a responsive and cooperative chord in the audience. Through his urging, the playgoers supply key phrases which are picked up by the actors with often hilarious results.

The more structured, topical humor dominates the first half

of the evening, and the material is as fresh as last week's front page — President Nixon's decision to send troops into Cambodia provides the inspiration for a lengthy, if somewhat unpolished, routine collating the President's TV address with Hitler's invasion of England.

A more effective presidential jibe comes in the form of a press conference by Nixon and Vice President Agnew (portrayed as a ventriloquist's dummy) at which the audience toosses the questions. A spoof on the movie rating system also comes in for round applause, and this is probably the finest of the structured sketches.

After intermission, the Open End company functions as a unit, staging complete improvisations during which any one of the 11 actors may change the direction of the action. The "life story" segment which closes the show is an example of this sort of mental transference, with words and reactions conveyed as if by mental telepathy to demonstrate the intra-company rapport.

It is, perhaps, unwise to single out any individual for special attention in what is so obviously a group effort, but the work of Jimmy Diederich is of such exceptional caliber that he must be brought forward for a special bow. Diederich plays the Agnew dummy, Jack Valenti, Hitler, a coughing pervert and a Southern college football coach among his other characterizations without a trace of accentual overlap, an outstanding effort.

Over the

LA Times

12/15/69 ↓

BY DAN SULLIVAN

Times Drama Critic

NEWPORT BEACH—Tennessee Williams' most recent plays have been disappointing, which has led some New York critics to broadcast, with unwholesome zest, that his talent is spent. Oh?

Their confidence is remarkable. An artist's career doesn't follow the steep simple arc of a pro quarterback's. Like the stock market, it is

subject to sudden surges and inexplicable fallings-off, and the best work, as in Verdi's case, can come last.

What Williams' muse may be holding behind her back is beyond anyone's knowledge. Meanwhile we can admire what we have been given so far—as the Open End Theater's "All the Lonely People" gives us an excellent chance to do.

It closed Saturday night at the group's tiny back alley theater in

Newport Beach, but chances for a Los Angeles date are good — the Celebrity Center on 8th St. is said to be interested — and certainly preserved. It is a small but surprisingly comprehensive retrospective of a major American artist.

The assembler is Warren J. Deacon, codirector of the Open End Theater and a long-time Williams buff. The title is from the Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby," whose loneliness does, when you think of it, seem Williamsesque. The basic ingredient is scenes from the plays — a dozen of them, including a beautiful, little-known one-act, "The Unsatisfactory Supper."

For context, we get snatches of his mother's memoir, "Remember Me to Tom," and a few of the more scandalized reviews. Also fragments of Williams' poems, some of them read by him on a record (in a wonderfully prosperous voice), short stories and essays.

Sense of Parallels

The material is sensitively, sometimes hilariously, interwoven to give a nice sense of the parallels between a man's private pain and his art—the grit that went into the pearl.

Mrs. Williams' perfectly sincere protest that she wasn't the model for the nagging Amanda in "The Glass Menagerie," for example, is surrounded by enough material to prove that, of course, she was. (Her lack of insight proves it too. "All we have in common is that we both like jonquills!" — pure Amanda.)

"Menagerie," "Streetcar," "Suddenly Last Summer," "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" and "Night of the Iguana" are generously sampled, whetting your appetite to see them again. But it is "The Unsatisfactory Supper," an early play, that makes the strongest individual impression. It is about a cracker couple trying to pass off an aging relative to someone else in the family, and its comedy is so merciless and yet forgiving that laughter and tears seem simultaneously in order.

Superior Actors

"Supper" happens to star the older and better actors in the company of six, Betsy and David Paul as the unwilling hosts and Genevieve Murray as the old lady who really doesn't want to be a drag (the play reminds you of Albee's "American Dream" with flesh on it).

The younger players—Walter K. Phelps, Robert Howsley and Carol Arnone—have the monotony that you associate with not-quite-formed stage technique; but they're growing.

Jim Diedrich's songs to Williams' "Blue Mountain Blues" are fun, and the six-latticed set, uncredited, is perfect—blue, too. What is wrong with the production is an occasional portentousness that seems to turn the playwright into a national monument; what is right is its reminder that he is (still) a national resource.

PRESS COMMENTS

"ALL THE LONELY PEOPLE"

LA TIMES 11-25-69



Like the irrepressible edelweiss, good theater has a way of showing up in the most unlikely places. One such is the Open End Theater, the size of a postage stamp in a Newport Beach back alley, among marine propellers, fish markets, a plating company and strong smells from the sea.

Inside, six impressive performers and one singer-guitarist engage in breathing life into an exceptional compilation of works by—and about—Tennessee Williams.

Warren J. Deacon, who put together and directed "All the Lonely People," is to be congratulated for the artistry and love he has lavished on both tasks. Through juxtaposition of passages by and about Williams, we are confronted with the entire creative process.

Included are recordings of the author reading his own material, excerpts from his mother's "Remember Me to Tom," poems, short stories and even Williams' earthy lyrics for Blue Mountain Ballads (set to music and sung here by Jim Diedrich).

Judiciously intermingled are evocative slides of Williams as a boy. More than half the ground covered is unfamiliar, touching and revealing.

But this is a work of love on the part of the grateful actors as well. On a tiny stage, they recreate the

haunted world of the author, reminding us with every line that Williams is one of the most eloquent and perceptive of playwrights, whose stature transcends the changeable winds of popularity.

Genevieve Murray is extraordinary accomplished and has the frail grace of Williams' frustrated ladies and a range that extends considerably beyond that. Betsy and David Paul are a husband and wife team of formidable skill. The three of them are flawless in "The Unsatisfactory Supper."

Howsley, Phelps and Carol Arnone, younger and less seasoned, are nevertheless disciplined and powerful in their own right. All six are a joy to watch and listen to, and work splendidly together.

Williams has written from the center of his being; he has looked at the world with x-ray eyes; that they are currently a little dimmed cannot possibly matter in the long run.

A tender affirmation, to be seen weekends at 8:30 p.m. through Dec. 20.

—SYLVIE DRAKE

LA TIMES 12-15-69

## Tustin 'Iguana' Is Positive Thrust for Mature Theatre

By LARRY SWINDELL

Orange County's little theater arteries throb with a chronic desire for better — or more elevated — theater. I have been among the passive crusaders, pleading that

while trivial comedies have their place, they need not stifle and subdue the very impulse for theatre of substance.

Therefore my interest always quickens when an effort toward enlightenment achieves some forward momentum. So for some time I had awaited, with proper anxiety, the Tustin Playhouse presentation of "The Night of the Iguana."

Some weeks ago its director, Warren Deacon, articulated his intention of striving toward mature community theater with this production. Young Deacon already has distinguished himself in college endeavors around the county, and now I am pleased to report that he has achieved strong dramatic theatricality with "Iguana," and with no

apologies for the local level.

I could catalogue some stern reservations about "Iguana" itself, to suggest that it is inferior grade Tennessee Williams, pretentiously symbolic and both overlong and overstated. Still, our sick playwright's faculty for inventing marvelously sick characters is unimpaired, and his extravagant poetic powers get an impressive audition in the text.

The important thing is that Deacon and his producer, Lawrence Reese, have given "Iguana" its full due, and then some. The text of the play has been improved by the deletion of the nazified family that haunted the atmosphere, and the production does not specify that the time is 1940, as the original text does.

This "Iguana" is a valid, full-bodied conventional drama with pseudo-spiritual overtones, and it is acted to the hilt by some of the sharpest dramatic talents in the Orange reaches.

### Plenty of Hart

Alan G. Hart is unable to contain himself in the early going, and is loud to the point of battering our sensibilities as he makes an emotional hard sell of the role of a defrocked minister who is searching for something or other — his salvation, I suppose — down in the steam-fest sector of Mexico. But the performance steadily gains control and conviction, and particularly in the last act

(containing an impassioned, lengthy soliloquy) Hart is splendid.

Jane Winslow is a sensitive actress who intelligently defines a creature of depth whose impending spinsterhood has been bred of self-sacrifice. Vivienne Maloy, she of the versatile command, is vigorous triumph as the volatile, earthy hotel owner. And Ross Corbin, who also provided the superb act, is extraordinarily good in his enactment of a dying, antique poet.

The balance of the cast is strong enough, and Sandra Mathews is particularly good as an antagonistic tourist. Margie Rosenblum and Wayne Beauvais are others of note.

"Iguana" should thrive and endure at the lovely Tustin Playhouse for several weekends. It deserves its applause.