

Suddenly, Last Summer, His Weirdos Became Real

by Berna Rauch

Suddenly, last Saturday ---while I was watching "Suddenly, Last Summer" -- I realized that Tennessee Williams is a playwright who will be one of the "immortals." (He and Arthur Miller are the only two living American playwrights about whom I can make that statement.)

"Suddenly, Last Summer" played Off-Broadway for a year, in 1958. The Broadway theaters found it unacceptable. After all, who could possibly believe a play about frontal lobotomies; confining a non-conforming woman in a mental institution and shooting her full of drugs to make her acceptably "passive;" and, worst of all, cannibalism in a "civilized" country?

Williams was sixteen years ahead of his time. "The play hasn't changed, but audiences have," said Gene Arceri, who's doing the PR for the play. No, audiences haven't changed--the times in which we live have changed. "Suddenly, Last Summer" is very much about TODAY, even though it's set in New Orleans in 1936. Tennessee Williams is the playwright-as-poet-and-prophet. And Williams is a universal "social conscience" for all of us.

(Incidentally, if you saw the movie, don't be put off. The play bears no relationship whatsoever to the movie.)

The play is the first production of the Company of Players and it's being done in the Main Theater of Lone Mountain College, San Francisco --on weekends through March 3. (More about that later.)

Everything happens in the tropical garden (complete with Venus fly-trap) of Sebastian Venable. Sebastian

died suddenly last summer, yet it's his invisible presence that holds the play together. And the play builds relentlessly to its shocking conclusion.

Sebastian and his mother, Mrs. Venable, were "a couple." Mother wants to keep the memory of her dead poet son "chaste." He was a great poet, says Mother. Every summer, while Sebastian and Mother were on their world travels among the "beautiful people," Sebastian wrote one poem. He spent the other nine months of the year being pregnant with his single poem, and it was Mother who helped him bring his "offspring" into the world once each year, for eighteen years.

But, last spring, Mother had a stroke and her face was slightly disfigured. She was no longer one of the "beautiful people" and therefore no longer useful as a procurer for forty-year-old Sebastian, who had a taste for beautiful young men. So cousin Catherine, who was still young and good looking, became Sebastian's companion on his annual poem-writing-globe-trotting expedition. And Catherine was the only person who was with Sebastian when, suddenly, last summer, he died.

The only trouble with Catherine is that she's sane, she's honest, and she has healthy instincts. She goes on and on "babbling this nonsense" which is "an affront to Sebastian's memory, reputation, and chastity." So, Mother calls in "Doctor Sugar." The doctor performs delicate little operations to fix brains and pacify intractable patients. Although it will be ten years before the doctor knows how well the operation really works, he does know that, after

he operates, his patients are "relieved of acute disturbances, but limited."

The Sebastian Venable Memorial Foundation (run by Mother) will happily donate a large sum of money to Dr. Sugar's clinic if he decides that Catherine, "the girl who is ruining my son's reputation," is in need of a frontal lobotomy. And if she doesn't really need that lobotomy? Well, says Mrs. Venable, "After the operation, who would believe her?"

Catherine is doomed for being honest in a dishonest world; for being a healthy, active woman in a society of passive "southern belles;" for living in a greedy society and caring more about the truth than about money. As you can easily see, Catherine is insane and unmanageable. She doesn't even like being in that "sweet, sweet place," St. Mary's Mental Hospital, even though Mrs. Venable is paying \$1000 a month to keep her there.

Catherine does terrible things like wanting to smoke cigarettes and trying to escape from the "sweet, sweet place," where she isn't allowed to have any mental objects, lest she do some damage. Of course, when it's time for "home visits" she can have a metal compact and lipstick in a metal case in order to look "presentable."

"Suddenly, Last Summer" is the tragedy of a healthy woman in a sick society. There are so many of "Them" and only one of her--so she's the "crazy" one. As for the true tale of cannibalism Catherine tells --well, that only proves she's out of her mind, doesn't it?

In an interview, Williams once said, "Society is a conspiracy by

the insensitive people of the world to destroy the sensitive ones." Indeed, it is.

Williams' great play runs for an hour-and-a-half, without intermission. (An intermission would have broken the spell.)

But what has the Company of Players done with Williams' material? My feeling is that, although it's a reasonably good production, it could have been a lot better.

Phyllis Courtney was convincing as Catherine. But Jane Mathias doesn't have quite the stature and dramatic intensity necessary for the role of Mrs. Venable. (As long as she spoke in her southern accent, she was unintelligible. When she slipped out of it, I could understand her.) The role requires an actress with the forcefulness of Judith Anderson in her prime.

As for Gene Nelson's Dr. Cukrowicz ("Doctor Sugar"), he was so bland and stiff that, at times, I thought he might have undergone one of his own lobotomies.

Malcolm Smith was wonderful as Foxhill, the servant. He was all-knowing, smug, unctuous, and thoroughly real. And Margaret Bridgman, as Catherine's brother, George, was completely believable as a Tulane fraternity man.

But there was something about the production that gave me the feeling the actors were acting "from the outside in" instead of "from the inside out." And where the actors are coming from has a

lot to do with A.J. Esta's direction.

The set was elaborate -- even lush. But I was turned off by some of the "tricks." "Mist" drifted out of the Venable garden and into the front rows. I don't think you have to make people cough to convince them of the "reality" of the set. The lighting, too, was overly-clever. Instead of feeling natural, the lighting felt "tricky." In short, the lighting simply didn't "work," and I hope it will be changed.

I did like the costumes -- the irony of whites, pastels, and chiffon fabrics in a morbid, "black" play.

Despite some of the drawbacks of the production, "Suddenly, Last Summer" is well worth your while. If you can't get out to Lone Mountain College (the 2400 block of Turk St.) or don't have the bread for admission (ranging from \$2 for students to \$4.50 for the front of the orchestra on Friday and Saturday nights) then go to the library and READ the play.

"Suddenly, Last Summer" is one of those rare works of art that is perfectly constructed -- and no matter who you are, you'll find it an experience in "consciousness-raising."

And let's hope one of our good theater companies in the Berkeley area decides to do "Suddenly, Last Summer" soon, and at people's prices. (As I sat there in the opening night audience, among San Francisco's "beautiful people" -- all as bright and glittery as shampoo commercials --I felt a bit like Cousin Maude, fresh in from the "boonies.")

j poet advertizes fer joni

male groopie wanted

by gud ol j poet

One of th minor side effects of th feminists rebellion is that fact that rcord companies suddenly realize that there were tons of talented women out there in f.m. radio land who wrote/sang/performed their own music. there has been no avaluanch of new signings but in the old daze it was impossible to get record companies to listen to you if you had tits, unless ... well you all no them old sordid stories.

in th last month a pile of records have been released featherin women singers most of whom also write all their own material. i will now launch into em an shower my infallable opinyuns of th same upon yall.

last on th list is carly simons Hotcakes. i'll ignore th obvious sexist puns that manifest themselves an get rite into her...er ... music! (ooooops! that was unconscious folks, honest!)

th album cover is real neat. carly in white dress with fat baby belly in a white room fulla white sunlite, only her blu eyes an rosy cheeks peekin out frm under razor cut brown hair to color the picture. quite effective. three stars to fotografer ed caraeff fr a job well done.

unfortunately th disc inside just don't measure up to th package's promise. th songs ar all very cute an traditional female safe. how much she loves her pretty superstar hubby an how fulfilling it is to be a wife an mother. th music is warmed ovr early safeway shop-perslicks. ive listened to this reek many times, tryin to find sumthing nice to say but nuthin cums to mind. it's one of them homiginous reckords that won't offend or turn me on. safe MOR soft rock. th only glimmer of hope is th chorus of Havent got Time fr the Pain, but th rest of th lyric gives me a pain.

next up is joni mitchell's Court and Spark on asylum. on first listening i got th impression that th arranger who evr s(he) is (no

credit given) tried to see how many instruments cud be crammed into each arrangement. repeated listenings do little to allay this fear.

altho th songs do tend, like most of joni's work, to gro on one. sumtimes like a cancer on a smokers lung, but gro they do. as much as i like her songs, and this record, i am getting a bit bored with th subject material. altho i realize it's good to be honest an express onesself in song, there surely must be more to her life than unhappy love affairs with stupid insensitive male rock stars and other assorted macho rip off artists. an ah yes there's th old wat a bore it is to be rich an famous riff too.

it's another good joni mitchell album, if you like joni, which i do, but it's not gonna win any converts to her ranks, altho as a convert it do give me a slitley rank feeling. as toni brown sez in one of her songs (see below) "...sum folks never change, they just get more the same...." that seems to be jonis main trouble muscially, an if her songs are an accurate portrayal of her life, socially too. surely at this point of th game there's a sensitive male groopie sumwhere that she cud love for himself alone, ain't there?

Let It Ride is th second l.p. by chi coltrane (i think). i seen sum reviews of her act in billboard, th music seller's bible, that promised big things of her. she plays piano an rites down happy bluesy songs with watevr th female (sic) equivalent of balls is. th songs hav that ancient, new, familiar sound. a voice coming out of a cloud or a stranger's face illuminated by a lited match in a fog for an instant. th tunes flow sweetly for a while an then jump up and grab u by th ears to fry th ol brane cells.

it's a good rocknroll l.p. her voice ranges frm little girl sweet on sum numbers to big momma shitsicker tuff on th next. altho a



th usual male-female stereotypes, it's nice to know that a woman can do, an say, an feel, all them love bound hard rock teenage emotions an express em as well as any man. it's on columbia an is well worth yer 3.33 or watevr th record companies rip u off fer these daze.

capitol has just put out a linda ronstadt anthology album, since she left th label an her new one on asylum seems to be doin o.k. hopein to milk a bit of money out of th unwary by a neat repackaging job. altho linda has one of th better voices in th folk rock field, none of her albums quite click.

part of th touble is that she don't rite her own shit an so is consigned to th limbo of pickin out th best songs that others hav already done good jobs on an doin em again. in most cases it's interesting enuff an with say "different drum" its a vast improvement, but having to depend on others in this age of singer-songwriters is a major handicap. anyhow this l.p. has some of her best cuts offa 5 capitol records over th last 7 years or so. since i got it free fr revu im keepin it, but i don't know if i shud recommend it to anyone who hasta pay hard cash.

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fer it.

last but not by any fuckin means least, is toni brown's new one for M.C.A. Good For You, Too! this record is just a solid fuckin blast frm one end to th other. toni is a woman who is a person first. theres nothing traditional or feministically stereotypical on this record or in any of th songs contained thereupon. there is a strength without being boastfull, a gentleness with out degenerating into lil girlishness, pain with out recrimination or accusation, all th qualities that i consider highest in either men or women.

her love songs to and abt men are feminist because they don't objectify th man, or th relationship, or herself. they are adult songs, where most rock n roll singers are most definitely adolescent. in her protest songs there is an understanding an compassion of the meaninglessness of th average american lifestyle. she condemns them not by placing herself on a golden soapbox an pointing th finger, but by commenting on th loss of humanity they experience, th alienation that isn't so far frm th things that us hip-folk feel too, in th deep heart, late at nite, wen theres nobody but yourself to talk to.

frm th commercially potential Goo For You, Too, to th last sad love song, Warm Winds, Sweet Wine, each song shines with th best of th new pagan consciousness that is really only a rebirth of awareness of true tenderness an sweet earth mother rythums. th back up band is truly sensation an th songs ar set in lil jewelboxes of individual beauty, no 40 minute solos fr th sake of daxeiling th drug dulled eardrums of th listening audience. toni brown continues to grow musically. an spiritually with each album but untill society at large, gets a lot healthier, i believe she'll be out there on th fringe dancing to her own music an showing th rest of us th way. i hope we catch up soon. she could be th first feminist superstar.

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