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theater review

## fireworks fizzle in Wilson's 'Fifth of July'

By Jonathan Siegle  
Of the Emerald

Lanford Wilson's "Fifth of July" is a tough play to stage. It requires disciplined directing and tight ensemble acting.

University Theater's production lacks both.

The blame belongs to the director. Quite simply, Prof. Faber DeChaine's directing is dreadful.

The young cast is unable to

pull off being over-30 members of the revolutionary '60s generation. There is no unity. The cast is unable to work together as a group.

Further, it seems DeChaine does not know how to discipline actors. For example, Dana Black, who gave a careful, journeyman performance in "Look Homeward Angel," is here a frantic dervish. He gestures unnaturally and amateurishly, shifts his feet

nervously, and is often somewhat disoriented.

This is not bad acting. Black has proved he can act. This is bad directing.

It may be true, perhaps, that DeChaine is being faithful to the spirit of a university theater in using shows to develop young actors. In so doing the show might suffer. But it is such actors who need the most careful direction, and that careful direction simply wasn't evident. It was sloppy.

"Fifth of July" brings together members and friends of the Talley family to a small Missouri town to finally dispose of the ashes of dead Uncle Walt, which Aunt Sally has been carrying around for a year in a candy box.

They're an odd mixture. Ken Talley, the more or less central figure, is a homosexual teacher, a former Berkeley radical who went to Vietnam and lost his legs. Jed, a gentle botanist who works as a gardener, is Ken's lover.

There's sister June, a bitter woman, and her wild, spoiled, self-centered daughter Shirley. And Aunt Sally, of course, a slightly dotty old woman.

Old friends John and Gwen are there too. He's a hometown boy who traveled to Berkeley with Ken in the '60s. Gwen's a superneurotic rich-bitch who also joined in the radical fun.

And there's Wes, a goofball hippie friend of Gwen's with no other connection to the group.

As actors, the cast must work in harmony to pull it off. They don't. They talk at each other. They recite their lines without conviction or understanding. And the flat blocking takes away

stage depth and any other possibility of their relating to one another.

Yet among this disharmony are some striking performances.

Karen Saddington as Aunt Sally is delightful. She plays the elderly widow with subtlety and restraint. Her posture and gestures are correct and proper. She's the only one of the cast with an accent, but she can't hang on to it. Dropping it altogether wouldn't hurt a bit.

Chris Bollweg is quite sensitive as the gentle botanist-gardener Jed. He too knows how to use a stage, and like Saddington, knows what to do when he's not talking.

John Leistner has some fine moments as oh-wow Wes, as does Mary Phifer in the role of rich-bitch Gwen. But Wes really has no part to play, and Phifer, after delivering a nice line, returns to posturing.

As a whole, however, the cast seem unfamiliar with their surroundings, uncomfortable and out of place.

They don't know who they are, what they're doing there, and why they must say what they say. And they either scream their lines to the rafters, or mumble them into their chins.

This lack of understanding is bad directing.

It's too bad really. There was some obvious talent on stage, talent that was misused, discarded, or wasted.

"Fifth of July" continues its run today through Saturday. Over in the Arena Theater is the revue "Oh What a Lovely War." See it instead; it's quite good. "Fifth of July," however, is just plain awful.

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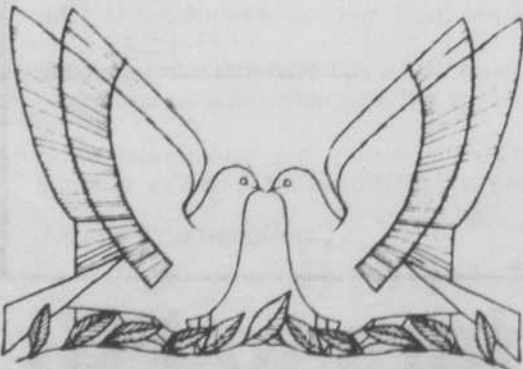
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The Emerald operates independently of the University with offices on the third floor of the Erb Memorial Union and is a member of the Associated Press.

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Classified Advertising	686-4343
Production	686-4381
Circulation	686-5511

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