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**'Ah, Wilderness' refreshing
Play shines under talented director**

By Jonathan Siegle
Of the Emerald

It is perhaps fitting that University Theater celebrates Horace Robinson's fiftieth year with his direction of "Ah, Wilderness!"

The production well represents the man who has given us so much — it's forceful, dynamic and innovative.

"Ah, Wilderness" is Eugene O'Neill's visionary look at the ideal American family. It is his only comedy.

Father Nat, who owns the local paper, is understanding, friendly, firm and loving. Essie is the behind-the-scenes power, strong and gently manipulative. The children range from the young brats, through the young intellectual Richard, to the typical college man Art.

There is Nat's sister Lily, a

teetotaling spinster, and Essie's brother Sid, a ne'er-do-well rummy. The two quietly have loved each other since she rejected him 16 years ago.

The play focuses on Richard, who has recently discovered radical politics, poetry and girls. He gets in dutch when he sends hot love notes to girlfriend Muriel, and

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her mother finds them.

He gets drunk, finds himself with a floozie, and rediscovers his love for Muriel. Along the way he does a lot of growing.

O'Neill's script is quiet and subtle. The humor is gentle. It inspires smiles and nods of recognition. Robinson has chosen to play up the broader aspects of the comedy.

Robinson is well aware of

the sacrifices he's made. But as he's said, playwrights don't write for his casts or his audiences. As with every script he directs, Robinson has made changes, and they work. The opening night audience loved his show from the start.

Yet not all of Robinson's touches work. He's turned Sid almost into a clown, and thus lost the long, bittersweet romance between him and Lily.

Robinson has directed Nat to turn from the table during dinner towards Richard, who is reading a book, to tell a tired old story. Nat turns in order to allow Sid to mug behind his back.

It's great fun, but the blocking is artificial and doesn't make sense. Robinson could have easily had Nat get up to tell the story and thus reasonably turn his back.

Nevertheless, what is so refreshing about a Robinson production is the clarity of his vision. He knows what he wants from his cast and he gets it.

And there are some marvelous touches. Richard and Muriel hold a tryst at a deserted beach at night. In contrast to the lovely, lush set of the Miller house, the two young lovers play on a blank, black stage. Each is wearing white, and the purity of their love against the stark black background is beautiful.

At the end of the scene the set lights come on revealing his parents at home waiting for Richard. They know where he is. The scene begins while Richard and Muriel slowly leave. It's a lovely transition.

The players are cast well. Don Alder plays Richard with all the enthusiasm of the teenager he's supposed to be. He's willful but sensible. He reflects the teaching of father Nat, superbly played by speech Prof. Bob Friedman.

Friedman is the steadying influence of the show. He and Barbara Kelly, as Essie, have raised their children with common sense and understanding.

Michael Fernbach's lighting is an effective part of the production.

When Sid returns to the living room after sleeping off a drunk, a hot light brightens his white shirt. Lily forgives him, as she always does. At the end of the play every light is out except for the one in the hallway where Nat and Essie meet before going up to bed. That plain device captures the mood and brings the audience right into the Miller home.

"Ah, Wilderness" will play in Robinson's theater today through Saturday. Get your tickets early. They'll probably sell out.



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