

Theater: 'Moonchildren'

Bitterly Funny, Funnily Bitter Play at Royale

By CLIVE BARNES

Once in a while a play manages to provide an epitaph for its time. Sometimes it is a great play such as "The Cherry Orchard." At others it is a less than great play, such as Clifford Odets's "Awake and Sing" or John Osborne's "Look Back in Anger." But in each instance the playwright takes a time and a place and sums it up.

Last night at the Royale Theater this happened in a bitterly funny and funnily bitter play called "Moonchildren." The time is 1965-66, and the place a university town set deep in the soul of L.B.J.'s America. The play is all about growing up in a hostile country. It is about taking a journey without maps, about developing ethics without ethics, about surviving without much belief in survival.

Seven or eight students share an apartment. The landlord is a patronizing slob, but they learn to live with him. In one way this is a romantic view of student life—of course, you can be reminded of those roisterously playful Henri Murger students in Puccini's "La Bohème." But the students are not quite so playful now. They talk of guns and war and cancer.

Their conversation is sprinkled with harmless obscenity, that middle-class student badge like pot-smoking and rock music, and they talk, for this is a comedy, humorously enough about relating with people, marching for peace, being drafted and sex. Quite a lot about sex. And they fantasize.

This was the generation of the free-fall, free-flow kooky stream-of-consciousness conversation. Ideas balloon upward in an age of pure unreason and no cant. Nonsense is the marching song of the day, the code word for survival.

The author of "Moonchildren," Michael Weller, has gone to great pains to place his students, flip, witty, concerned and disturbed, against the very world that has made them flip, witty, concerned and disturbed. This is the first Broadway generation gap comedy that is seen from the young side of the gap, and although it is going to annoy and puzzle some members of the Broadway audience, it will enchant and instruct many more. Despite its bleak ending, which so poignantly and successfully parallels that of "The Cherry Orchard," it is play full of zest and authority.

Of course Mr. Weller exaggerates his world picture just as Neil Simon exaggerates his. Perhaps it is difficult to believe the hippy girl who is so freaked out she has to sit under tables and blow bubbles—although come to think of it I once knew a man who sat under tables, and that was centuries ago—

The Cast

MOONCHILDREN, a play by Michael Weller. Directed by Alan Schneider; settings by William Ritman; lighting by Martin Aronstein; costumes by Marjorie Sloman; production stage manager, Alan Hall. Presented by David Merrick, in association with Byron Goldman and Max Brown, by arrangement with Martin Rosen. At the Royale Theater, 242 West 45th Street.

Mike	Kevin Conway
Ruth	Maureen Anderman
Coolie (Mel)	Edward Herrmann
Norman	Christopher Guest
Dick	Stephen Collins
Kathy	Jill Eikenberry
Bob Rattle (Job)	James Woods
Shelly	Cara Duff-MacCormick
Ralph	Donagan Smith
Mr. Willis	Robert Prosky
Lucky	Ronald McLarty
Bream	Louis Zerlich
Effing	Peter Alzado
Uncle Murry	Salem Ludwig
Coolie's Father	George Curley
Altkman	Michael Tucker

and the son of a chief of police who goes to peace rallies with a police pistol is also perhaps hard to take. But Mr. Weller is not only recording the life-style of a time and place, he is also wryly humorously commenting on it. Accuracy of description is his aim rather than his method—this is no naturalistic picture of students in 1965 but rather a witty and very human commentary on them.

The play, in an earlier version called, very daringly but very aptly "Cancer," was originally produced in London at the Royal Court Theater. This season it was produced at the Arena Stage in Washington, and this production has now been brought most happily here. (What would Broadway do without the Royal Court or the Arena Stage?) It is really welcome as one of the most lively and pertinent plays of the last few seasons.

Alan Schneider's staging seems as perfect in its low-keyed colloquialism as does William Ritman's student pad setting, featuring 857 quart milk bottles, assorted posters and a refrigerator that probably only just postdated electricity. Mr. Ritman is a master of organized chaos, and Mr. Schneider has his actors pick their way delicately through the special conflicts of both play and setting.

Where Mr. Schneider and his strongly convincing cast are at their most brilliant is in bringing out the many levels of this play, which runs from the broadest of farce to, eventually, the deepest of despair. It is a large cast and it is almost unfair to mention James Woods as the embittered Bob, or Kevin Conway and Edward Herrmann as two cleverly articulate students with hearts of stone.

There are two kinds of comedy. The comedy that makes you laugh and then lets you go, and the comedy that makes you laugh and then, for an encore, makes you think. Eventually the latter plays are the better value for your money. "Moonchildren" is fascinatingly and dazzlingly one of those.