

Weekend

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Stage: D. H. Lawrence's 'Fox' Adapted

THE theater is so littered with faulty, though often well-meaning, dramatizations of literary classics that it comes as a surprise and a distinct pleasure to encounter Allan Miller's evocation of D. H. Lawrence's novella "The Fox." As adapted and directed by Mr. Miller, the play opened last night at the Roundabout Theater.

"The Fox" is an impassioned tale, which is, in Lawrence's words, about "the illusion of attainable happiness." Each of the play's three characters — two women who live together in a secluded farmhouse and a young soldier who interrupts their privacy — has a hope for fulfillment. The hopes are at cross purposes, and colliding, they can lead only to tragedy.

In his adaptation, Mr. Miller is faithful but not slavish to the original. All the dark symbolism and yearnings are there, but as a dramatist, he has invented dialogue, altered some incidents (including the ending) and compacted an already claustrophobic

Triangle of Tension

THE FOX, based on the novella by D. H. Lawrence; starring Jenny O'Hara, Anthony Heald and Mary Layne; written and directed by Allan Miller; set by Roger Mooney; costumes by A. Christine Glenn; lighting by Ronald Wallace; sound by Philo Campanella; production stage manager M. R. Jacobs. Presented by Gene Feist and Michael Fried, The Roundabout Stage One, 333 West 23d.

Nellie March.....Jenny O'Hara
Jill Sanford.....Mary Layne
Henry Grantel.....Anthony Heald

situation. In his version, everything takes place within the farmhouse, a shadowy, atmospheric design by Roger Mooney, complete with open fireplace, squeaky door and glowing kerosene lamps.

There is, necessarily, some loss — of the author's shifting point of view, as he enters the minds of his three interwoven characters, as he tells us, for example, of one woman's violent dreams. For the sake of drama, Mr. Miller occasionally overstates a conflict. There are a few melodramatic lines, and each of the three people is a more heightened personality than in the book.

However, the spirit of Lawrence is intact. "The Fox" is not a diluted attempt at Story Theater, or a dramatization with voice-over narration, but an imaginative play, with three vibrantly theatrical characters, each embodied in performance.

At the center of the triangle is Nellie, played by Jenny O'Hara with reserve and suppressed sensuality. Marmish in appearance, passive of nature, she tries to assess a situation before she allows herself to be involved. We learn about Miss O'Hara's Nellie by watching her silently watching the other characters.

As Jill, Mary Layne is her opposite — affable and generous, but when she is wounded, she suddenly becomes vengeful. Her emotions are self-evident; in contrast, Miss O'Hara conceals hers. The catalyst of the conflict is Anthony Heald as the boyish soldier. He is ingenuous, but as we soon realize, he is also insidious (although the actor lacks a certain mystery). At first, Miss Layne welcomes the stranger, then stuns him for his

impudence — as an interloper come to shatter her idyll.

It is Miss Layne who undergoes the most striking transformation in the course of the evening. Her characterization becomes an acting out, an enrichment, of the original fictional character. In the novella, Jill verges on a stereotype spinster — frail, thin, bespectacled. Miss Layne makes her more womanly and self-possessed, and therefore a more substantial antagonist for Mr. Heald.

Miss O'Hara and Mr. Heald are especially acute in their scenes of courtship. The young man has set his cap for the older woman, and nothing can deter him from that goal. She is frightened by him — to her he is an incarnation of a fox — but at the same time, she is a victim of her incipient desire. Miss O'Hara communicates these warring emotions with a look of startled vulnerability. When he touches her, she doesn't know which way to turn, and, almost as a reflex, she accepts his embrace.

In his adaptation and direction, Mr. Miller has captured the isolation and the straining for contact, the environmental bleakness and the turbulence that stirs just beneath the surface.

There is a dramatic tension on stage that is quite the equal of the Lawrence story.

Mei Gussow



Jenny O'Hara and Anthony Heald in a stage version of D. H. Lawrence's "The Fox," adapted and directed by Allan Miller, at Roundabout Theater.