

Theatre: Down Under

'Summer of the 17th Doll' Staged Here

By **BROOKS ATKINSON**

PROBABLY the trouble is the language. Since the Australians speak English and so do we, we assume that "Summer of the 17th Doll" says the same things to us that it does to Australians.

But at the Coronet Wednesday evening, this theatregoer felt that the real quality of Ray Lawler's play was escaping him. The play comes to us after a long engagement in London; it went to London after it had been enthusiastically greeted everywhere in Australia. Now Mr. Lawler, who also plays one of the leading parts, has come overseas with an original Australian company to visit another land where English is the mother tongue.

The odd title refers to a carnival doll that Roo Webber, foreman of a sugarcane cutting gang, brings to his sweetheart every year when he comes to Melbourne for the lay-off after the sugar season has finished. For the five months of the lay-off he and his buddy, Barney, shack up with a couple of barmaids; and for sixteen years they have all had fabulously enjoyable times. It has been a romantic arrangement for all of them.

But the seventeenth summer finishes it. Although no one is willing to face the facts, time has run out on all of them. Barney is no longer the lady-killer he imagines himself to be. In the sugar fields, Roo has been superseded as king of the cutters by a younger man who is faster and stronger. In the last act, which chronicles the break-up of a happy living arrangement, Mr. Lawler seems to be drawing a parallel between happiness and the illusion of happiness, showing the dry rot that eats into romance when people refuse to face the truth.

In Australia, the sugar cane gangsters and the seasonal lay-off probably have significance that they do not have here. And Australians can bring to Mr. Lawler's play a point of view that is missing here. "Summer of the 17th Doll" is a record of domestic crises — temperamental clashes occasioned by a barmaid who has not lived through the rousing sixteen previous summers; the distaste a country man has for working in a city job; subtle questions of pride and loyalty, other bits of the kind of folklore that every nation makes for itself.

But to an outlander, un-



Ray Lawler

The Cast

SUMMER OF THE 17TH DOLL, a play in three acts by Ray Lawler. Staged by John Sumner; presented by the Theatre Guild and the Playwrights Company, by arrangement with the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust and St. James' Players, Ltd.; scenery designed by Anne Fraser and supervised by Marvin Reiss; production associate Warren Caro; production stage manager, John Cornell, At the Coronet Theatre.

Pearl Cunningham	.....	Madge Ryan
Bubba Ryan	.....	Fenella Maguire
Olive Leech	.....	June Jago
Barney Ibbot	.....	Ray Lawler
Emma Leech	.....	Ethel Gabriel
Roo Webber	.....	Kenneth Warren
Johnnie Dowd	.....	Richard Pratt

fortunately, "Summer of the 17th Doll" seems like a commonplace drama written around commonplace people. Although it is good-natured, it lacks distinction. Nor does the busy, noisy performance help much in John Sumner's direction. The constant rushing around and the incessant shouting are like stock company work.

Mr. Lawler, who plays Barney, is a short, cocky little man who moves with the speed and precision of a bullet. There are lively and unpretentious performances in all the parts—June Jago as a high-strung barmaid with a heart of gold and a cutting tongue; Madge Ryan as a barmaid who is more elegant in style and more reserved in manner; Ethel Gabriel as a mother whose native wit amounts to wisdom; Kenneth Warren as the deposed king of the cane-cutters; Fenella Maguire as a glowing young lady from next door; Richard Pratt as the massive, muscular new monarch of the cane fields.

If "Summer of the 17th Doll" were in an incomprehensible foreign language, it might conjure up mysterious images of life in far-off places among elusive people. It is the English language that is confusing. We think we know the full meaning of what the Australians are telling us. We don't.