

'BLUE DENIM'

One of the Best Plays of the Season
Is Admirably Acted and Directed

By BROOKS ATKINSON

TO SOME theatregoers, "Blue Denim" is the best American drama of the season.

In comparison with "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs," "Look Homeward, Angel" and "The Rope Dancers," that evaluation gives "Blue Denim" a distinction it cannot sustain on artistic grounds. But it does indicate that James Leo Herlihy and William Noble have written an original and merciful drama that is superlatively well acted under Joshua Logan's direction. Without being a thesis play, it does throw light on the difficult relationship of parents to adolescent children, and it does portray the agony that adolescent children bring on themselves when they blunder into adult situations.

Although some of the things that happen in "Blue Denim" are odious, the adults and the adolescents are inherently decent people. Major Bartley and his wife are responsible parents concerned with the welfare of their two children. They want to give both children—a girl of 23 and a boy of 15—as much independence as possible. But the moral standards of their home are high.

Worried Parents

The Major and his wife are troubled because Lillian, their daughter, is infatuated with a flamboyant young man who is probably an incipient gangster. If they are not worried about Arthur, the son, it is because they do not know much about him. Arthur and his pal, Ernie, are leading a secret life of petty dissipation with cards and beer in an impromptu club room in the basement. It is there, also, that Arthur meets Janet, the daughter of a neighbor, and



NEW SUE—Alice Pearce is now playing the owner of an answering service in "Bells Are Ringing."

falls head-over-heels in love with her.

Although all three of them talk in a spuriously sophisticated way, they are really naïve. Sex is a mystery that Janet and Arthur wonderingly explore. But something happens that projects all of them into a world that is completely outside their experience. Janet becomes pregnant. Since she and Arthur are still in high school and everything in their family and social life seems to be against their marrying, they reach the frightening decision of arranging an abortion.

Alarming Situation

This would be hideous in any circumstances. It becomes terrifying because Janet, Arthur and Ernie have to make all the arrangements and collect the money in secret, and they find themselves invading a furtive underworld that is not only alarming but revolting. At a time when they need their parents most, they believe that they must avoid their parents completely.

If this is a moving rather than a sensational situation, it is because Mr. Herlihy and Mr. Noble subordinate it to the main theme of their drama—the difficulty of understanding between adults and children—and also because they have drawn the characters with compassion. Particularly in the last act, the tension between the characters is almost unbearable. It is released in the last few minutes of the play by a simple statement that Arthur makes to his father: "Father, I want to talk to you." When the curtain comes down, a shattered family gratefully and quietly draws together.

Although Mr. Logan has directed more spectacular productions than "Blue Denim," he has never probed so deeply into the heart of a play and succeeded in expressing its truth so simply.

The performance is spontaneous. Every part is admirably acted. Chester Morris, as the father, impassive, slightly embarrassed, fundamentally good-natured; June Walker, bright, earnest, busy and affectionate as the mother; Pat Stanley as the daughter whose feelings are easily wounded; Warren Berlinger as the youth whose cocky glibness subsides into a kind of loyal desperation as the story develops—all give excellent performances in individual keys that harmonize.

Beautifully Acted

But the validity of "Blue Denim" rests largely on the acting of Arthur and Janet. Both parts are beautifully played. Burt Brinckerhoff's languid confusion about the world as Arthur, his unwilling taciturnity towards his father, his selfless devotion to Janet and his panic when she is in trouble; Carol Lynley's round, soft, glowing, fallible youth as Janet—give "Blue Denim" an authentic innocence that makes it amusing in the preliminary scenes and infinitely touching at the end.

A second visit to "Blue Denim" confirms an initial impression that, from a literary point of view, it falls a little short. It is written in the naturalistic style, which is relatively objective and inhibits the authors from making the kind of personal statement that Tennessee Williams, for example, imparts to his dramas.

In the naturalistic style there are theatrical tricks that seem unworthy of the theme. Situations have to be "planted" artfully. Exposition has to be "worked in" subtly. Doors have to be opened on cue so that one character can hide from another, as in a melodrama. The telephone extension, conveniently placed near the original instrument, becomes essential to the denouement. Things have to be shrewdly contrived.

Weary Naturalism

Since the naturalistic style pretends to a kind of objective truth, anything that is implausible becomes excessively troublesome. For instance, the parents upstairs are supposed not to hear what the children are saying in the basement. But the children frequently raise their voices, if only to reach the ears of the audience; and the theatregoer is always aware that objective truth is being violated. Furthermore, the prose style of naturalism is meager.

The whole weary business of theatrical naturalism robs "Blue Denim" of some of the richness and eloquence the characters deserve. Except for the naturalistic style, it could be as poetic and memorable as "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs," "The Glass Menagerie" and "The Member of the Wedding."

Although these things have to be said, "Blue Denim" is, nevertheless, one of the best plays of the season on the level of writing that the authors have chosen. In skill, power, knowledge and sympathy, it presents a notable portrait of unnotable people.