

Fine acting but a mind-bending play

It is virtually impossible to pick up any work of American fiction these days other than historical or "western" novels, without finding some character on his way either to, or from, his psycho-analyst.

It is obviously the in thing. People like me who either do not recognise our neuroses or else get so much fun out of them that we

would not let an analyst near them are presumably hardened squares.

Psycho-analysis, they tell me, is taking the place of the sleeping pill. I only ever took a sleeping-pill once — and stayed awake all night.

It is rather disappointing, therefore, to find one of my favourite authors, Arthur Miller, succumbing to the sort of hysterical attitude that I associate with the cult of the sleeping-pill and the analyst.

In *After the Fall*, presented this week at the National Theatre by the Nairobi City Players, he takes a character — said to be himself — and places him figuratively on the analyst's couch to speak his random thoughts as they come.

The theme is apparently intended to be man's inhumanity to man — the sort of subject of which one would expect Miller to make much. He has tackled aspects of it in some of this century's best plays.

But where before Miller has been able to take an individual case and use it to point a universal moral, this time he appears to have started from a general problem and boiled it down until it becomes merely one man's worry.

This is not about man's inhumanity to man — but about one man's inhumanity and the indignities he suffers. This would be a reasonable theme, but by trying to place it against a grand background he diminishes the stature of his central character and cuts away any defence against the possibility that, if we do not like this character, we will cease to care what happens to him.

The analytical nature of the play — since it means that all characters but one only speak at the instance of the principal — turns it virtually into a monologue, and this again needs great sympathy for the character.

Quentin may, of course, find his sympathisers — among those who like his particular, masochistic form of introversion, who can accept his premise that: "The past is holy, and its horrors are holiest of all." A statement that comes dangerously close to complete defeatism.

If the play is depressing, the production as a whole is not — principally because it is heartening to see a standard of presentation and acting that ranks with the best the National Theatre has seen.

If I never for a moment admired Quentin, I admired throughout Nigel Slade's marathon performance in the role — also Paula Brown and Jamini Vincent as the victims of his two failed marriages and Yvonne Lee as the potential third wife. David Field is excellent in two separate roles and I have not a hard word for any member of the cast.

Production is by Peter Brown who has two main problems — how to vary the somewhat monotone note of the writing, and how to get Miller's dream-people across as men and women.

The first he overcomes by an imaginative use of the rather stark setting, never letting the eye rest too long in one place, and by coaxing a wide range of responses from his cast.

The second, however, has proved a pitfall, mainly because Mr. Brown is too reverent towards his author. Uncompromising in its severity this play may be, but not so harsh that a little vulgar humanity might not be allowed to creep in. A little unashamed comic relief would not come amiss — and the opportunities are there, but rarely taken.