New theater company debuts in BR

By DAVID FOUL

A new theater group called the River City Repertory Company established a beachhead in Baton Rouge Friday, with an ambitious double bill that had to do battle with one of the world's lowest air conditioners.

The bill included Wendy Wasserstein's harrowing My Sister in This House and one of Samuel Beckett's most extraordinary works, the brief solo drama Krapp's Last Tape.

Such a pair of plays would challenge the resources of most theater groups. The River City Repertory Company is challenged, often swamped, by the demanding material.

But there's a tremendous handicap to appreciating what's there-Friday's performances, in the Performing Arts Center of Baton Rouge Magnet High School, fought to be heard over the annoying sound of air conditioning. In both plays, the loss was considerable.

My Sister in This House, a hit at the 1981 Festival of New American Plays in Louisville, is based on a true incident.

Two sisters, products of repressive convent education, are reunited as servants in the home of the provincial Danzard. Mme. Danzard and her daughter Isabelle pursue a dreadful middle-class life, chattering mindlessly about meals and clothes and how lacking everyone else is. The Lauton sisters, the older Christine and the younger Lea, go about their work without complaint, living together in the attic.

What seems like a symbiotic relationship between servant and master is actually a disaster waiting to happen. Immense cruelty and hatred seem to lurk in the shadows of the Danzard house. The repression only forces it to the surface. The lines of communication gradually disintegrate. The sisters' fury explodes with a force that defies the Danzard's conventional morality, in a bond of homosexual incest. Eventually, a challenge will come from the Danzard, and it is met with an act of unspeakable horror.

Mood clearly means a lot in My Sister in This House, directed by Bessie Muns. The prevailing noise level never allowed one to emerge. What resulted seemed superficial and lacking in the curdling nature of bourgeois blather that the early scenes would seem to imply. The individual performances failed to get below the surface, to establish a sober for the same dramatic damage.

In Beckett's Krapp's Last Tape, John McConnell—until recently a regular in LSU Theatre productions—played the aged, tormented Krapp, seeking some comfort in precious bits of tape-recorded recollections.

McConnell's performance was the most successful element in the entire evening, and I would honestly like to see it again in another venue. The noise was doubly frustrating here, since the drama relies on our hearing the taped voice of the younger, grating Krapp—"the stupid bastard," the older Krapp tells his tape recorder, "I took taped to be..."

As with any young actor tackling the challenge of one of Beckett's beloved survivors, McConnell must struggle far too obviously just to get going—he has to convince us, first of all, that he's old before he gets down to revealing the reverberating emptiness of Krapp's present state. Still, it is a worthy effort.

So, despite its problems, was this whole evening of theater. The means are severely limited with River City Repertory Company, but the end seems to be an honest desire to make meaningful theater happen. This company deserves the right to stumble, even to fail, as it finds its way. It has an ambitious plan for the coming months. I look forward to following its work.

There will be full performances of My Sister in This House and Krapp's Last Tape at 7:30 p.m. Saturday, one again at Baton Rouge Magnet High School. Tickets are available at the door.

As their nightmare deepens, Christine Lauton (Ann Hamilton, above) comforts her frightened sister Lea (Gretchen Case) in a scene from River City Repertory Theatre's production of 'My Sister in This House'.

Suspicious and hateful, Mme. Danzard (Rose Erickson, far left) and Isabelle (Holly Langford, near left) coldly greet Lea and Christine as they arrive home from church.

The bourgeois Mme. Danzard is trumped by her snooty daughter Isabelle in a card game in 'My Sister in This House'.