

THE
CAVERN
1978

FOR Anouilh read Ennui—that was my thought at the interval of Teddington Theatre Club's current production (until Saturday) of the French master's "autobiographical" play, *The Cavern*.

This is the one in which the author (played here by Cliff Broad) puts himself on the stage as a sort of Greek chorus trying to tell us that the play we are (fitfully) seeing and the dramatic tricks that he employs will not come off—they very nearly don't.

Happily, all is saved by the second half and everything comes together more or less satisfactorily in the end. But were there some dodgy

moments en route!

First half matters are not over-helped by the direction (his first major one with the society) of John Holloway, who appears to have only one

speed — dead slow.

This was a pity as it is in the first half that the play needs all the help it can get. Things tend to drag on too long — has no one ever heard of cutting? And, as Anouilh himself tells us — "The author complicates his own plot."

It was, to sum up, a play I admired more than liked. But do go and see it as it contains some quite telling performances (as well as some others) turned in by a cast containing several faces new to the group.

I particularly noticed Brian Campbell as the Count (a shame he is so tall), Davina Andrews as his Countess (incidentally surely a Duke is addressed as "Your Grace" a Count or Earl is merely "My Lord"?), Alex Weir as Baron Jules and Abigail Ortiz as the Baroness. In fact, on the whole, I preferred the people "upstairs" to the people in the kitchen (Cavern), pity we didn't see more of them and less of the lower orders.

I, personally, could also have done with less of the over-verbose Author in the person of Mr. Broad.

Below stairs I liked Andrew Martin's Seminarist and the two domestics of Laurie Coombs and Mary Davies.

Incidentally, the costumes (turn of the century Paris) and set are magnificent (Melanie Wood designer) and almost worth a visit alone.

"WHAT the audience wants is suspense" says a leading character in *The Cavern*, being performed by Teddington Theatre Club at Hampton Court Theatre this week.

What they get is an intriguing and elaborate game devised by Jean Anouilh, taking a leaf out of Pirandello's book.

Anouilh's characters are hardly in search of an author since the author is represented on stage, criticising his own play — the one he claims he never wrote — and giving a kind of running commentary on the action.

The idea is that the playwright's characters, drawn but given only the sketchiest outline of a plot, begin to make up their own lines and situations.

The setting is an aristocratic Parisian household at the turn of the century (Melanie Wood's remarkable set gives us full view of upstairs and downstairs simultaneously). The cook, once the master's mistress, is found dead. A detective is called in. Are we in for a whodunnit?

The detective (Chris McDermott, lively and resourceful as ever) hopes so, but the playwright (Cliff Broad, quizzical but over-emphatic) has other ideas. He wants more from his characters than stock responses and predictable dialogue, but he is constantly frustrated by the characters' desire to let the play develop by itself.

It is an audacious experiment by Anouilh, hoping

to maintain our interest in a dozen or so characters, while going along with the playwright's outspoken dissatisfaction with the play at the same time.

Amazingly, John Holloway's production works both as a play — with all the attendant suspension of disbelief — and as a theatrical experiment. Although, thinking back to *Forget-Me-Not Lane*, in which the main protagonist also acted as narrator a link-man, perhaps the playwright's intervention was not quite so revolutionary.

Outstanding in the generally strong cast were Brendan Buckley as a supercilious valet, and Mary Davies as a waif-like kitchen maid who causes a stir upstairs when she pours scorn or their attempts to patronise her. Susan Doyle's cook had her moments, but she put so much stress on the embittered nature of the woman that it was impossible to feel sympathy for her when it was required. — NS.

REVIEWS