

EIU's '60s reunion proves successful

Before *The Big Chill* there was *Fifth of July*.

The Big Chill is, of course, Lawrence Kasdan's 1983 film, already a classic, about the reunion of seven graduates of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor from the '60s who mourn their lost youth, ideals and passions. (In the same vein was the 1981 John Sayles film, *Return of the Secaucus Seven*.)

Fifth of July, which has just concluded a six-performance run at EIU, is Lanford Wilson's Chekhovian play about the reunion of four Berkeley activists of the '60s. The setting is the Talley homestead in Lebanon, Mo., where Ken Talley, a crippled Vietnam veteran, lives with his lover Jed. The action takes place on the evening of the Fourth of July and the following morning. Ken has withdrawn from teaching and wants to sell the place and travel with Jed. Potential buyers are former classmates Gwen, a copper heiress, and her husband John, who intend to turn the house into studios to launch

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Gwen's recording career as a country-and-western singer. Completing the quartet is Ken's sister June. Joining them for the holiday are June's 13-year-old daughter, Shirley, Gwen's guitarist Weston, and Ken and June's Aunt Sally, who is there to scatter the ashes of her late husband.

The play was first produced in 1978 at New York's Circle Repertory with William Hurt as Ken and Jeff Daniels as Jed, and then in 1980 at the New Apollo Theatre with Christopher Reeve (later Richard Thomas) as Ken, Daniels as Jed and Swoosie Kurtz as Gwen.

The Eastern production, in the

Fine Arts Center Playroom, brought out its good and bad points. It's a long, talky play which seems to drift along from one act to the next, and it takes a while to sort out the relationships. But the dialogue, often witty, sometimes overlapping, and the collection of disparate characters holds your interest, and before the evening ends with a burst of violence, there are a number of revelations and resolutions.

Terry Allen directed it with skill and good timing. The student actors looked as if they might not even have been born as yet in the '60s, but they worked hard, and some of them came close to succeeding, notably Jill Taylor, even if a bit too ladylike, as Gwen, a self-described "burnt-out case" from drugs and drink; Alison Eudeikis, who brought a nice earth-mother touch to the role of June; and Robert Poe as the spaced-out, gullible guitarist, the play's one truly comic creation.

Anne Lloyd, as Shirley, seemed to be emulating Kurtz, and there

was nothing wrong with that. Eileen Sullivan had some amusing moments as Aunt Sally. Michael S. O'Brien, as Ken, was personable, but reserved and unimpassioned, and did a good job of hobbling about on crutches. The playwright never fully develops Jed as a character, but T. James Estep did what he could with the role. Patrick N. Clayberg was dapper as John.

There was some tepid kissing and hugging by the gay lovers and a bit of pot smoking, and a few four-letter words were used, mainly by Gwen — all in a manner to offend no one.

O'Brien's living room set had a cozy, worn look. The costumes were by Jack A. Smith and the lighting by C.S. Blady.

Fifth of July is the first play in Wilson's Talley Family series. It was followed by *Talley's Folly*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1980. As far as I know, it's the first thing of his ever done at Eastern, and Allen and company are to be commended for bringing it to us.



'Fifth of July:' Disparate characters hold your interest.