

Hurlyburly

(Westwood Playhouse; 498 seats; \$32.50 top)

Never has contemporary life on the margins of Hollywood success looked as meaningless and desperate as in David Rabe's "Hurlyburly" at the Westwood Playhouse.

Rabe sees "this town" through scum-covered glasses, and for three acts and more than three hours, his characters, four men with tenuous showbiz careers and pathetic personal lives, degrade themselves and each other. Result feels like a long, bad party, with the laughs mitigated by the hangover.

Sean Penn in the lead and play's success on the New York stage should sell plenty of advance tickets but latter part of the 10-week run

could be rough sledding at the box-office. Neither the theme nor this production, loosely directed by the playwright, are likely to please L.A. audiences much.

Play takes place in a Hollywood Hills bachelor pad and revolves around Eddie (Penn), an anguished, insecure, and recklessly rude character who has knack for driving his unstable friends nuts by saying whatever will undermine them most.

Danny Aiello is Phil, a desperately unhappy actor and ex-con given to fits of violence who's torn between leaving his wife for good and

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going back to her.

His friendship with the much-younger Penn, described by Penn as "an attraction of opposites," seems more a function of sick habit, as do relationships with two others, Penn's callowly sophisticated roommate Mickey (Scott Plank) and struggling producer Artie (Michael Lerner).

These men, apparently plagued by idleness and the uncertainty of their business, take turns bemoaning the lack of clarity in this "vague hurlyburly spinoff of what was once primetime life" while stuffing cocaine up their noses and dragging on joints to further blot out their connection with reality.

Female characters, all three of them portrayed as unfortunate airheads who'll perform sex acts at the snap of a finger, are the subject of more nastiness, much of it quite disturbing. Even when Eddie and Mickey foggily recall how the six-year-old daughter of their stripper friend Bonnie (Mare Winningham) got upset after one incident, they conclude it wasn't their fault.

Winningham, interestingly, plays against type, injecting her barroom balloon-dancer with the only real verve and sense of self of any character in the play. But it only makes it all the more upsetting that she would associate with a worm like Eddie and succumb to the

whims of his sick friends.

"This town, Eddie," she says, "is nothing but mean, in spite of the palm trees. And that's my point about desperation." As if that explains it.

Somewhere in the structureless progression of the piece, it emerges that Eddie is outraged about the neutron bomb, which is "a thing that loves things" and will wipe out human life while leaving objects intact.

That apparently gives him license to act like a thing, in hopes of surviving.

If there are redeeming or illuminating elements in this miasma that gave a glow to this piece in its New York run, directed by Mike Nichols, neither Rabe nor this cast succeeds in carving them out.

Low-key, foggy first act leaves the audience without a clue whether these characters are to be accepted at face-value or as vicious parody. Penn is certainly believable as the self-indulgent, half-stoned pseudo-intellectual central character, and Aiello is almost sympathetic as the self-aware jerk Phil, but their relationship lacks credibility.

Play's conclusion — a momentary snatch of clarity and the brief warming to each other of two pathetic creatures — one contentious and jaded, one gentle and vacant, is a wan achievement indeed.

Daws.