The gay activist strode into the Pocket Theater ready to invoke all his rhetoric upon the unsuspecting University Theater production of "The Boys in the Band." "Just try and make me like it. I dare ya," he invectively muttered to himself. In the end, he almost cried, and now he carefully rates "The Boys in the Band" as a "must see" category. This UT production, directed by Jack Watson, is simply excellent.

To be sure, the production cannot be rated such because of any consideration relevant to homosexuality. "The Boys in the Band" is as accurate a description of gay people as Uncle Tom's Cabin is of Black people. But as a play, this production is both intense and (generally) well acted.

Prepare yourself for a birthday party that will include every stereotype of the mythological gay kingdom: a bitchy queen, a "pock-marked, Jewish fairy," a 1966 homosexual Negro, a bulky but dumb midnight cowboy, and two clawing lovers.

Michael, the host; first enters. Charles Harill has the perfect body and eye movements for this neurotic, bitchy queen role. While waiting for the rest of the guests, he and Donald (Roger Baron) engage in tawdrey conversation which reveals their major shortcomings. Neither Harill nor Baron can, in the first act, carry their lines. The bitchy-funny remarks fall like dominoes, landing in forced succession rather than natural conversation. Baron is too intent on trying to act queer, and it shows. His actor's credibility is diminished when he occasionally forces a strain on himself, or a twitch of the ass.

The two fighting lovers arrive to pick up the yet dull pace. Hank (Jerry Williams) does a great acting job. He has excellent eye contact (which he overdoes in the second act), and expressive body movements. This allows us to forgive him when he wrecks an important line later in the play. Larry (J.C. Pock), Hank's embattled lover, overdoes his role. Rather than nurturing his anger through the play, he immediately slaps the audience with a Lear-like intensity when he should only be bitchy. While Mr. Pock is adequate for his role, he comes off as weak next to the strong Hank.

The first act is soon given its salvation, however, when Emory arrives. Lloyd Brass does a superlative job with Emory: the flighty, interior decorator, "pansy." The gestures, and the voice are superb. Upon Emory's omnipresent backdrop, the rest of the gay characters arrive. Bernard (Ric Tilson) does a good job in his homosexual Negro role. "Negro" is here used with every 1966 implication of the word. The butchy Cowboy is all right. Although throughout the play he tries too hard to be cute rather than just dumb.

As the cast is now assembled (sans guest of honor), the catalyst enters: Alan, the dreaded Heterosexual. Everyone has to butter it up so Alan's straight sensitivities won't be threatened. The actors now have to act like real characters who are acting. They do it well. Unfortunately, Alan (Ken Walsh) is unconvincing. When he calls Emory a "Goddamn little pansy," he does it softly without any of the realistic hostilities of Joe Straight. He plays his catalyst role so softly that the audience is obliged to project his part upon him. The other characters' intensity lets us put Alan aside, however, and the play rolls into its second act where the excellence emerges.

Harold, the birthday boy, makes his entrance perfectly. Ted Hicks plays Harold admirably and the momentum that his perfect entrance begins, is maintained for the rest of the play. Emory, slugged in the mouth by Mr. Straight, again shines as he shifts from a flighty fairy to a toned-down Mercutio.

The gay characters "come out" in the second act and begin to poignantly deal with their lives, their homosexuality. Michael, Donald and Larry carry their lines well in this intensity, as does the rest of the cast. The performance now precisely controls the audience, demanding their attention. Each character reveals his essence, and as the play winds to a conclusion, we are fascinated by the interacting cameos that reveal their profiles before us. By the play's end, the cast has received the most honest form of applause — tears.

Those tears wash away any rhetorical stance a reviewer could take. In his depiction of a segment of gay life, author Mort Crowley makes a statement on gay liberation even though he didn't mean to. In terms of the unpretentious analogy between "The Boys in the Band" and Uncle Tom's Cabin: we at least have been given an insight into a real form of slavery, except that the contemporary Simon Legrees are more subtle. When Donald says, "At times I think I was raised a failure," or when Michael says, "If only people could learn not to hate themselves so very much," we begin to understand the hand our slave society still holds over gay people. The invisible hand that made the 1966 gay person fall, and the 1966 gay person hate her or himself, is still at work today. Unfortunately, Crowley doesn't know it's the hand of a bigoted society, not an unhealthy homosexual. Crowley also writes: "Show me a happy homosexual, and I'll show you a gay corpse." This may have been true in the 1960s, but we've advanced some today. Make no mistake: "The Boys in the Band" is still relevant to some contemporary gay people, though its stereotypical mythology is now shallow and caricatured in the context of 1972.

In spite of this, the UT production of "The Boys in the Band," as a play rather than a social comment, deserves both credit and attendance. The closing performances this week are scheduled for 8 p.m. today, Friday and Saturday, plus an added 2 p.m. Saturday matinee.