

The British Hippies

"Withnail And I," now at the Ritz, points up the English contradictions of the flower people.

By John Feffer

The Sixties were not all freedom and beauty, flower power and free love. As the new British movie *Withnail and I* clearly indicates, beneath all the flowers was a lot of dirt.

The film begins as the Sixties are coming to a dismal close. Two actors, Withnail and the nameless narrator, are scrounging for auditions in London. Withnail is gaunt, self-centered and nasty, looking like Bob Geldorf from *The Wall's* seamier scenes. His good-natured sidekick, "I," is becoming progressively less good-natured as life with Withnail deteriorates.

Their social life, their artistic careers, their kitchen are all a mess, made less cheery still by the appallingly grey London weather. So they do what any self-respecting hippies would do in such circumstances: Withnail and narrator exit the city and go back to nature.

But nature — in the form of the country cottage of Withnail's Uncle Monty — turns out to be just as dreary as London. Fuel and food are scarce, and the inclement English climate has followed them, rendering even the beautiful rural landscapes pallid and lifeless.

Meanwhile, Uncle Monty has taken a liking to the handsome narrator, which prompts an unexpected visit to the country house to consummate his desires. And so the plot goes

The most interesting aspects of *Withnail and I*, however, lie not in the plot, but in the backdrop. After all, the film is about the English experience of the Sixties. Withnail and narrator are hippies, circa 1969. These British chaps are tremendously articulate and more likely to recite Shakespeare than Jefferson Airplane lyrics when drunk. Furthermore, they are in an uneasy alliance with the aristocracy in their rage against middle-class order. American hippies had no such ally.

Also different is the tradition of homosexuality in England. These English boys are both more cynical and more uptight about their sexuality than their American counterparts. Not so Uncle Monty, whose generation had done their experimenting in the 1920's and 30's.

At Oxford, poor Monty had gone wild for Norman, "some ponce with red hair and a book of poetry stained with the butterdrips of crumpets." His pursuit of the narrator is an ironic twist for the Sixties — the older generation "corrupting" the morals of the younger.

But these elements are almost incidental. Unfortunately, *Withnail and I* aspires to comedy. Writer/director Bruce Robinson tries to extract situational humor from the most mundane and hackneyed situations: the boys break furniture for a fire, the boys cook a chicken for the first time, the boys try to put a wayward bull back in its pen. But even the fine acting of the two leads, Richard Grant and Paul McGann, can't make these cliches funny. Robinson, who wrote the screenplay for *The Killing Fields*, should have stuck to tragedy.

Withnail And I is now showing at the Ritz 5 Theater.Δ