

gallows humor, even when it is the slightly blunted Simon variety.

But Simon, the too often praised playwright, does not deserve all of the credit for the substantial success of the Little Theatre production. The laugh lines may be pure gifts from author to performer but in this case they are delivered with sure timing and thoughtful feeling for character by two exceptional amateur actors.

Marvin Boskin plays Mel Edison, the 46-year-old executive who finds himself wandering distractedly about his fashionable upper east side apartment in between distracted wanderings in Central Park and on to the unemployment office. For a Simon play this is a rich character, raging at the insults that New York City daily hurls at its inhabitants and yet showing frailty and sensitivity.

Mr. Boskin plays both extremes of the character and at the same time fills in some of the gradations in between to make the portrayal whole. If a Simon play is to succeed beyond being a mere transitory amusement, it needs this kind of acting, which can add what the playwright has left out.

Lucy Alpaugh, the garrulous, confident and ultimately frayed Mrs. Edison, is an appropriate complement to Mr. Boskin, finally mirroring him. Mrs. Alpaugh is one of the most versatile of the regular LTJ players and she has given the kind of performance that is expected of her without simply doing the expected. She is a chatterbox who lives at or near the top of her lungs but is forced to bear more than she can and crumples under the burden.

The cast also includes Mel's brother and three widowed sisters — Bernard Fox, Barbara Land, Phyllis Baker and Armede Brown. All deliver competent enough performances but, with the notable exception of Mrs. Brown, fail to pull the full comic potential from their second act scene together.

"Prisoner" quite definitely is Simon's best play, at least partially correcting the common failing of taking a serious issue and treating it in a superficial manner. Here the issue is serious and the treatment purports to be light but simultaneously succeeds in creating pathos within a recognizable emotional context.

It is a strange undertaking, one that is incompletely realized and that, frankly, has a rather disturbing outcome for the viewer who takes in all that is being put out. Which is to say that those who go only to laugh at Simon's gag lines may do only that but face the danger of being struck by more than they anticipated.

Additional performances will be tonight and Sunday and then Wednesday through Sunday of next week.