

Screen: 'Boys in the Band'

Crowley Study of Male Homosexuality Opens

By VINCENT CANBY

WATCHING the film version of Mart Crowley's "The Boys in the Band," which opened yesterday at the Loew's State I and Tower East theaters, I experienced the same sensation I'd had when I saw the Off Broadway play two years ago. It was a feeling of time disorientation, as if, in 1970, I were looking at a well-made Broadway play from the late thirties or early forties, something on the order of Clare Boothe's "The Women" or Joseph Fields's "The Dough-girls."

This is in spite of the fact that "The Boys in the Band" is about male homosexuality, a subject that had to be treated with carefully metered ellipses in "The Green Bay Tree," and in spite of the fact that the film uses four-letter words that once (honest!) were more shocking than glimpses of stocking.

The reasons for this are two. One is obvious: "The Boys in the Band" is a well-made play, a little too well-made, too mechanical to be especially interesting. Not as obvious, perhaps, is the fact that many conventions of contemporary stage direction (so evident in both the play and the film), as well as the mannerisms of a certain kind of fake-elegant, American homosexual, are patterned after fashions set 30 or 40 years ago on the Broadway stage.

Thus one can understand why William Friedkin, the director, has transferred the play's consciously archaic theatricality so faithfully to the screen—with the original Off Broadway cast, and almost every line of bitchy, fake-elegant dialogue, intact. Friedkin, who directed the very pleasant "The Night They Raided Minsky's" and the extremely intelligent film adaptation of Pinter's "The Birthday Party," was not hired to improve "The Boys in the Band," but to preserve it.

This he has done, with the addition of a pre-title montage that serves to introduce the major characters in their natural habitats (bookstore, antique shop, street).

The movie then opens with the ringing of a telephone and thereafter remains fixed in the time and place of the play—a Saturday night birthday party at Emory's duplex apartment, fitted out with, among other things, an autographed poster of Marlene Dietrich and an extraordinary variety of toilet articles.

In addition to Emory, a for-

The Cast

THE BOYS IN THE BAND, directed by William Friedkin; screenplay by Mart Crowley, based on his own Off-Broadway play; cinematographer, Arthur J. Ornitz; produced by Mr. Crowley; a Cinema Center Films Presentation; released by National General Pictures. At Loew's State I, Broadway and 45th Street, and the Tower East Theater, 72d Street and Third Avenue. Running time: 120 minutes. (The Motion Picture Association of America's Production Code and Rating Administration classifies this film: "R—restricted, persons under 17 require accompanying parent or adult guardian.")

Donald	Frederick Combs
Harold	Leonard Frey
Emory	Cliff Gorman
Bernard	Reuben Greene
Cowboy	Robert La Tourneau
Hank	Laurence Luckinbill
Michael	Kenneth Nelson
Larry	Keith Prentice
Alan	Peter White

mer Ivy League sort who is beginning to look like an aging queen, the celebrants include what is apparently meant to be a cross-section of homosexual types. They run a short gamut from seemingly straight to swish (including a token Negro), their one common denominator being their homosexuality. In the film, as in the play, the most interesting character—the only one who might have an identity beyond that as a homosexual—is Harold, a bitter, former professional ice-skater, whose birthday it is and who coolly describes himself as "a 32-year-old, ugly, pockmarked Jew fairy."

Except for an inevitable monotony that comes from the use of so many close-ups in a confined space, Friedkin's direction is clean and direct, and, under the circumstances, effective. All of the performances are good, and that of Leonard Frey, as Harold, is much better than good. He's excellent without disturbing the ensemble.

My reservations about "The Boys in the Band" all have to do with the source material, which sounds too often as if it had been written by someone at the party. Crowley has a good, minor talent for comedy-of-insult, and for creating enough interest, by way of small character revelations, to maintain minimum suspense.

There is something basically unpleasant, however, about a play that seems to have been created in an inspiration of love-hate and that finally does nothing more than exploit its (I assume) sincerely conceived stereotypes.

Crowley's vision of the world would seem to have been attained from a vantage point about three millimeters above the heads of his characters. If I heard him correctly, between the lines, he's most funny when he thinks he's being serious. He's saying something to the effect that life can't be one, long, continuous matinee. It's cheap sentiment, borrowed, I suspect, from the Late Late Show.