Theater: Howard Sackler's 'Great White Hope'

Play at the Alvin Stars James Earl Jones

By CLIVE BARNES

HOWARD SACKLER'S play "The Great White Hope" came into the Alvin Theater last night like a whirlwind, carrying with it, triumphantly, James Earl Jones. Indeed, to be honest I'm not sure that the whirlwind was not on the other foot, and that was Mr. Jones who was doing some of the carryingbut about the triumph make no mistake,

Mr. Sackler has written a mr. Sackler has written a great part—a tragic hero, cheated, degraded and at last brutally beaten. But more than this, Mr. Sackler has used his hero, Jack Jefferson, a figure based closely on the first black heavyweight champion of the world, Jack Johnson, as a symbol in part black aspiration. of black aspiration. And white audiences are bound to feel white guilt—a guilt hardly lessened by the treatment meted out to the present Black Muslim heavyweight champion Muhammed Ali champion, Muhammed Ali.

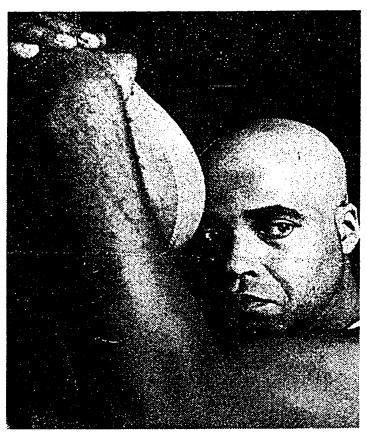
The play has an epic scope and range to it. It is spread over 3 acts, 19 scenes and a few assorted monologues. It picks up the Johnson story soon after that Australian day in 1908 when Johnson whipped Tommy Burns to win the championship and takes it to Havana in 1915, when Jess Willard, the great white hope, won it back for the whites—at least for a time.

Very properly Mr. Sackler does not stick to the letter of history — at the end, for example, his hero, all but battered to a pulp, is fairly and squarely beaten, having resisted offers to throw the fight. Certainly Willard did not beat the real Johnson so effectively, yet Mr. Sackler is here dealing with playwriting and not prizefighting and he is right.

He has also whitewashed his hero, and it is here perhaps a fault of the play that, apart from his pride, Jack Jefferson is almost too good. of history -- at the end, for

Jefferson is almost too good, too noble, to be true. And while we are fault-picking the play-although trimmed the play—atthough trimined a little since I first saw it at the Arena Stage in Washington — is still too long, and sprawlingly constructed. But this now hardly matters at all in the face of the play's tempestuous merits, and the opportunities it gives not only to its baffled bull of a hero but also to the white girl who chooses to share his degradation.

It is in this relationship, warm and yet finally corrosive, that the play finds its



James Earl Jones stars in Howard Sackler's new drama

The Cast

THE GREAT WHITE HOPE, a play by Howard Sackler, Staged by Edwin Sherin; setting by Robin Wagner; costumes by David Toser; lighting by John Gleason; music arranged by Charles Gross; production stage manager, William Dodds. Presented by Herman Levin At the Alvin Theater, 250 West 52d Street. n At Street

S2d Street.

PRINCIPALS: James Earl Jones, Jane Alexander, George Mathews, Lou Gibert, Jon Cypher, Jimmy Petham, George Ebeling, Peter Masterson, Marlene Warfield, Hilda Haynes, Eugene R.

heart, for it lies at the nub of Jack's anger and rejection. This forbidden love is also the visible gesture of defiance that Jack throws out to the white world andthrough a Mann Act prosecution-his downfall.

Mr. Sackler, at the end of the most harrowing and tense scene in the play, where Jack spurns the girl, completely sums up the tragedy after the girl has committed suicide and her muds-pattered body is brought in. It is laid on Jack's massage table, and Jack, tortured with a grief too much for a race to bear, let alone a man, sobs out:
"What Ah done to ya . . .
what you done honey . . . honey, what dey done to us.
..." This is a tremendous moment in the theater-one of those moments when the heart rushes up not just to the play, not just to the play-ers, but to that almost mystic note of communication and understanding that is perhaps the theater's most potent miracle.

The play moves faster and

crisper than it did in Washington, although the director, Edwin Sherin (who shares fully in the triumph with Mr. Sackler and Mr. Jones) is the same, as, very rightly, is much of the cast. The changes then are minimal, but their effect is sufficient to make a very interesting if not entirely successful play into a theatrical experience that should not be willingly missed. (In fairness to Washington, I must admit that I ington, I must admit that I too was quicker on my toes on this occasion and, having had the chance to read the play, was, I think, more understanding and receptive.)

It is Mr. Sherin's sheer It is Mir. Sherin's sheet skill that keeps the play interlocking so neatly, adding up to a fast series of something like cinematic takes, and he uses this pace to build up a fine and oddly convincing picture of America and Americans at the beica and Americans at the be-ginning of the century. With Mr. Sackler's digressions in Mr. Sackler's digressions in Europe he can do little, but in general both playwright and director do provide a boldly if not finely drawn backcloth against which to display the contestants, and whether the play moves to a Chicago chette or to a Long Chicago ghetto, or to a London courtroom or, finally, to a striking scene outside the fight ring in Havana, Mr. Sherin and his actors find the right style.

Of the vast supporting cast the play is the size of a Edwin Sherin Staged Cheated Hero's Story

musical-two splendid characterizations stand out, Lou Gilbert as the seedy but decent little Jewish manager cent little Jewish manager and, most remarkably, Jane Alexander as Jack's girl Ellie. Miss Alexander, as bright as a sparrow and with an almost spiritual beauty, makes a wonderful foil for Mr. Jones, a kind of frail and defiantly loving Desdemona to this 20th-century Othello. As I was leaving the theater Mr. Jones was receiving a

ter Mr. Jones was receiving a standing ovation of the kind that makes Broadway his-tory. If I had had the time 1

tory. If I had had the time I would have stayed to cheer, he deserved it.

Mr. Jones pounded into the role, spitting and shouting. He rolled his eyes, he stamped on the ground, he beat his chest, he roared with pain and when he even pain and when he even chuckled it seemed like thunder. Here was Jack, larger than life, good-natured and with a bitter, mocking ghetto humor that was always turned in upon itself. Here too was the all but unbreak able pride of a man, stiff, unyielding, stubborn, and yet also that very gentle soft-ness you find so often in very big men. If anyone deserves to become that occasional thing, a star overnight, then Mr. Jones deserves no less.