

March 23, 1981

STAGE: 'CHUCKY'S HUNCH,' A ROCHELLE OWENS PLAY

By FRANK RICH

THE downfallen middle-aged hero of Rochelle Owens's new, onecharacter play, "Chucky's Hunch," isn't your everyday loser. He's a truly spectacular wreck. Chucky is an unemployed drunk who suffers from high blood pressure, rotten teeth and almost terminal loneliness. He lives in a dilapidated house in upstate New York with his 82-year-old mother, a dog and some cats. For amusement, he fights with his mom and writes letters to Elly, the second of his three former wives. Elly is on Chucky's mind because he's just read in the paper that she won the state lottery. But Chucky apparently isn't on Elly's mind: she never bothers to write him back.

Yet Chucky was special once - or at least thought he was. As a young man, he was an Abstract Expressionist artist in the jazzy Greenwich Village of the 1950's. He made the bohemian scene; he revolted against "bourgeois values"; he protested McCarthyism, hitchhiked across the country and slept with many women. How could this once fiery, adventurous fellow end up a broken bum, living off his aged mother's Social Security checks? This is the question at the heart of "Chucky's Hunch," and Miss Owens answers it with considerable wit and feeling, as well as with a refreshing lack of cant.

The play, which opened last night at the Theater for the New City, is basically an extended epistolary monologue. Kevin O'Connor, the star of the show, holds forth in Chucky's gloomy living room and recites his letters to the unresponsive Elly. In between the letters, he wanders disconsolately about his old canvases as the theater is flooded with some amusingly chosen 50's music: Dave Brubeck, "Blue Suede Shoes," "True Love." At one point we hear another letter, from Chucky's mother (the voice of Leora Dana), that is vibrant enough to make the unseen matriarch a full-fledged participant in the drama.

Almost all of Chucky's letters are a wonderful mixture of anger, madness, regret and self-incriminating introspection. As we hear more and more, we gradually come to realize that the young Chucky was probably untalented, certainly domineering and selfish. But he also seems to have been a live wire, and his old magnetism and humor still come through. There is some very funny, idiosyncratic writing here, especially when Chucky is blaming Peggy Guggenheim for his career failures, or drunkenly fantasizing that a pair of unlikely animal lovers, a snake and a porcupine, have conspired to murder his last friend, his pet dog. (Miss Owens, author of "Futz," has a quite eccentric view of the animal kingdom.) In the most hilarious speech, Chucky describes his mother's sexual activities with an 85-year-old suitor. Torn

between jealousy and erotic excitement, he can't help wondering aloud, "Where did Ma learn her techniques?"

Of course, "Chucky's Hunch" is most of all an actor's vehicle, and Mr. O'Connor rides it for all that it is worth. This performance - presumably created in collaboration with the director, Elinor Renfield - is the best work I've seen this actor do. Speaking in a gin-sodden, sandpaper voice that occasionally erupts into mirthless, private laughter, Mr. O'Connor keeps Chucky's past and present in perfect focus. As the character drifts off into sad defeat and mad bouts of panic, his dancing eyes always allow us to see the pugnacious, swaggering and obnoxious hipster that Chucky once was. Most important, he manages to avoid any slobbering self-pity - even when, at the very end, Miss Owens's script declines into conventional mawkishness. "Chucky's Hunch" may be a small play about a small life, but attention must be paid. A Skipped Beat CHUCKY'S HUNCH, by Rochelle Owens; directed by Elinor Renfield; setting by Abe Lubelski; lighting by Peter Kaczorowski; costumes by Carla Kramer; sound by Paul Garrity; production stage manager, Nancy Juliber. At the Theater for the New City, 162 Second Avenue, at 10th Street. ChuckyKevin O'Connor