

BEHIND THE FOOTLIGHTS

Reprising Dark Years of the Blacklist

Are You Now or Have You Ever Been
(Back Alley Theatre)

By DOROTHY H. ROCHMIS

Ten years after first experiencing (and indeed it is an experience) the production of *Are You Now* which playwright Eric Bentley based totally on the transcripts of the hearings before the House Un-American Activities Committee, I have come to the tiny Back Alley Theatre to repeat the shattering, conscience-wrenching drama.

Would that exposure to this production were mandatory for college students and young people! It is a part of American history which they must know. Older people in the audience remembered well and reacted accordingly as this, one of the most shameful chapters in our history, was reenacted.

In July 1979, ex-Senator George Murphy insisted, "Those are just myths about the so-called McCarthy era. That blacklisting that everyone talks about, actually only happened in New York, it didn't happen in Hollywood. There were a group of, I think, 10 writers, they always said they were blacklisted, but I don't think they were." And earlier, Billy Wilder (in 1957) intoned, "Blacklist, schmacklist, as long as they're all working . . . Anyway, of the Unfriendly Ten only two have talent — the other eight are just unfriendly."

It should be noted that the HUAC named "unfriendly nineteen" of whom ten (the "Hollywood-Ten") were given prison terms for being "uncooperative" to the committee. Among them were Alvah Bessie, Ring Lardner Jr., Albert Maltz, Adrian Scott, Dalton Trumbo, Samuel Ornitz, Gordon Kahn (all writers), Herbert Biberman, Robert Rossen (directors), Howard Koch, producer, and Larry Parks, actor.

Among the most moving scenes in the *Are You Now* production is the one with Larry



In play based on hearings of House Un-American Activities Committee, 'Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been', are (from left) Michael Cavanaugh, Cameron Thor, Rick Manheim, and Martin E. Brooks.

Parks, the young actor who at the time of the hearing, was just coming into his own, having been hailed for his starring performance in the *Jazz Singer*.

Parks (husband of Betty Garrett and the father of two young sons) was a guileless participant in several meetings of a supposed Communist party cell, and felt justifiably threatened that his promising career would go down the drain. He broke down on the witness stand and did what the committee insisted he should do: he named names (none of which were new to the committee which was interested solely in his capitulation).

His breakdown while on the stand is a shattering moment in the "you-are-there" production. Sadly, actor George De La Pena (whom you may recognize because he played the title role in the film *Nijinsky*) is rather thin in his portrayal and speaks with a slight and unrecognizable accent which is distracting.

Most impressive is Thalmus Rasulala as Paul Robeson in a strong, stirring, vital reading, Joe George playing Lionel Stander, and Allan Miller as Abe Burrows. Toni Sawyer was mov-

ing in her portrayal of Lillian Hellman and Sam Vincent realistically and concisely played Elia Kazan.

Less than satisfying because of an elocutionary bent in their characterizations were Howard Honig as Sam G. Wood, Sam Vincent as Edward Dmytryck and John Medici as Ring Lardner Jr. — while in his dual role as Jose Ferrer, Medici offered caricature rather than character. Outstanding as chair of the committee was Martin E. Brooks, affable enough to inspire hissing.

Whatever weaknesses the production contains, however, are more than compensated for by the strength of the text and the contents. This production is superbly directed by Allan Miller and produced by Laura Zucker. It must be a *must* for theatergoers generally and for those who remember the shame of those hysterical years when HUAC reigned without censure.

The Back Alley Theatre is at 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. Performances are Thursdays through Sundays at 8 p.m., and Sunday matinees at 3 p.m. For reservations call 780-2240; the charge line is 654-1703.