

THEATRE REVIEWS



ED KRIEGER

Allan Miller and Anna Katarina star

Days and Nights Within

BY T. H. McCULLOH

Produced by Laura Zucker; Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; (818) 780-2240. Opened Oct. 18; plays Wed.-Sun., 8; Sun. mat., 3; ends Nov. 30.

On the surface Ellen McLaughlin's *Days and Nights Within* may look like another politically oriented interrogation piece but on deeper examination it is more than that. McLaughlin bows to Erica Wallach, whose book *Light at Midnight* "inspired and informed this play," but the bow should really be to McLaughlin herself who does not allow political pamphleteering to enter into her taut, insightful peephole view of the interrogation of Elsa Weber in an East Berlin prison between February of 1950 and August of 1951. There are those who will dig furiously for political implication here but it is simply and wisely merely the very human story of one interrogation, which could have taken place between a Nazi officer and a underground agent, an Inquisition Bishop and a noblewoman of liberal bent or a Green Beret and a Viet Cong woman. It is deceptively simple in its structure and as tightly wound and unnerving as the days and nights of someone like Elsa Weber must be.

Following Elsa through her portages between reality and fantasy under the calm, rational and very lucid dissection of her Interrogator, *Days and Nights* draws on the imagination and desperate humor of this woman who, if she has information to divulge, will never do it. The richness of Elsa's personality, her intelligence, her will and her courage are deeply understood by Anna Katarina, an actress of chiarascuro mood and intent. Katarina's face launches a thousand thoughts into her portrait of a human mind rising above the eventuality of certain doom. "I tell the time by the quality of the air," Elsa tells the Interrogator, an intuitive choice not unlike those made by the actress herself in her superlative performance.

As the deceptively warm and human Interrogator, Allan Miller embraces his inhumane objective with honesty and frankness, inching his way into Elsa's confidence and then backing away imperceptibly for his next strike. Particularly in the fantasy dream sequences Miller's figuratively outstretched hand is as terrifying to Elsa as it is nerve-racking to the viewer. Both performers are guided impressively by director Michael Pressman, caroming in and out of reality (the sudden use by the Interrogator of Elsa's husband's cigarette lighter) to a grey world of imagination (a very European low comedy slapstick routine between Elsa and her nemesis). Pressman allows as little time as possible to lapse between the generally brief moments we are given of these 19 months of Elsa's prison life, creating a flow interrupted only as though a camera shutter were clicking open and shut, and his sense of timing and movement during the scenes is impeccable.

It is a stylish production all around. Rich Rose has created a simple but emotionally gratifying setting of angled grey panels contributing to the feeling of claustrophobia, the action taking place on a platform for the Interrogator's desk and one for Elsa's cell. Leslie Rose and Ken Lennon have lit the setting and the action exquisitely and the simple costumes by Sylvia Moss are striking in their verity. The sounds in Elsa's mind and punctuation for her rapid shifts of mood are superbly reproduced in the excellent sound design by Jerry Sider.

Although not anything more than it pretends, *Days and Nights Within* is of value in its celebration of the human spirit, its obstacles and hopes. After all, Elsa could be any one of us at any time.