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ED KRUEGER

Michael Cavanaugh, Byron Morrow and Martin E. Brooks are Interrogators

Are You Now or Have You Ever Been

REVIEWED BY LEE MELVILLE

Produced by Laura Zucker for the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; (818) 780-2240. Opened May 26; plays Thurs.-Sat., 8; Sun., 3 & 8; ends July 8.

"Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" That implicating question rang out repeatedly from federal hearing rooms across the country during the 11-year investigation by the House Un-American Activities Committee, appointed by the House of Representatives to find out how deeply rooted Communism was in the entertainment industry. Over 25 years have passed since the HUAC was disbanded and it has been 10 years since Eric Bentley's *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been* first premiered in Los Angeles. Taken from the actual transcripts of those hearings, Bentley's documentary play condenses the actual words of 15 actors, writers or directors who unwittingly testified before the committee. Many careers were ruined, none more so than the young midwestern farmboy's who made a name for himself in Hollywood by playing Al Jolson in a couple of film biographies. His name: Larry Parks.

In this 10th anniversary production, directed by Allan Miller (one of the producers a decade ago), George De La Pena plays Parks in a riveting performance powerful in its economy and honesty. Parks admitted a five-year association with the Communist Party in the early '40s when as a young man beginning in the business he became a member of the Actors Laboratory which in 1951 the HUAC accused of being a Communist front. Now Parks faced seeing the end of his prosperous career. How many young actors today would become involved in a similar situation to advance their career? De La Pena captures his essence—the engaging, charming manner of this clean-cut, unassuming actor. To watch De La Pena depict this man crumpling before your eyes is simultaneously devastating and mesmerizing. It is one of the finest performances ever seen on a stage. How ironic, while watching this production's Sunday matinee at the Back Alley, just a few miles away at the Hollywood American Legion Post, one of the scenes of the investigations, *Tamara*, which peripherally deals with Facism, was playing and a few block from there, at Theatre West, Mrs. Larry Parks was reliving those painful memories in her own show, *Betty Garrett and Other Songs*. Talk about survival!

Though the Larry Parks portion haunted me for the rest of the play (and still remains with me as wrenching reminder of political manipulation), there are other gripping moments and other finely textured performances. Howard Honig portrays three men who testified, most notably Arthur Miller; Sam Vincent is director Edward Dmytryk and, later, Elia Kazan; John Medici is Ring Lardner and Jose Ferrer; Frank Aletter plays Marc Lawrence (and also counsel to Parks); J.M. Jackson doubles as Sterling Hayden and Jerome Robbins; Joe George is Lionel Stander and Thalmus Rasulala's rendering of Paul Robeson brings the play to a powerful close. The only woman included is Toni Sawyer who enacts Lillian Hellman's written appeal which states her refusal to appear. Director Miller repeats his role of the humorous Abe Burrows, complete with the writer's ticks and mannerisms. All deport themselves with professional skill. As chairman, counsel and committeeman of the hearings, Martin E. Brooks, Michael Cavanaugh and Byron Morrow, respectively, capably handle the difficult chores though there is a directorial tendency to let them overplay their villainy. The play's point would be stronger if they were depicted more sympathetically.

The rather non-descript scenic and lighting design are expertly taken care of by George Becket and Dawn Hollingsworth. No costume coordinator is credited which may account for the fact some of the men's suits and ties are not right for the '50s period. Still and all, the production is a strong reminder of what errors were made—and still could be today. Let's pray we learn from the past.