

## Theater Review

### Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been?

by Richard M. Finder

*Are You Now or Have You Ever Been.* The Back Alley Theatre, 15321 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys (off San Diego Freeway, 1 block past Sepulveda. Driving time 40-50 minutes; add 10 minutes for street parking). Thursday through Saturday 8 p.m., Sunday 3 p.m., 8 p.m. \$10-\$12, discount season coupons. Charge line 654-1703. Comments: Superior play, outstanding set and cast makes trip well worthwhile.

By the time *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been* opened at the Cast Theatre in Los Angeles on February 15, 1975, the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) was passing from the scene as a terrifying power in American politics after 38 years.

The play itself was not so much written as edited verbatim by Eric Bentley from HUAC transcripts. The play went into production at Yale in 1972 with Allan Miller, who directs this production, in a key role (Abe Burrows).

It opened in 1973, took the leap to off-Broadway in 1975, survived to go on tour, and became Los Angeles' longest-running production. It has been produced in various languages in a variety of countries, and won its share of awards. Allan Miller became Laura Zucker's co-producing director at the Back Alley Theatre, and *Are You Now...* celebrated its 10th anniversary by going into production at Back Alley.

The play is presented as if the audience was actually in the audience at a hearing of HUAC. The cast is superb, and while the players bring life to the characters they portray, there is little

attempt to make them look like their real-life counterparts.

Those who lived through HUAC's "investigation" of Hollywood will remember the fascination and revulsion of the spectacle. The abominable show continued because at any moment that interest flagged the committee's counsel could simply ask questions like, "Was Gregory Peck ever mentioned at these meetings?" or, "Was James Cagney a member of your (Communist) cell?" The answer was "no" of course, but there was always that thrill of doubt.

If the matter seems absurd today, think of the effect it had on the lives and careers of people like the great Jewish actor Morris Carnovsky, Clifford Odets and Dashiell Hammett, to name three whose names are mentioned, but do not appear in the play.

Carnovsky was removed from the Socialist-sympathetic theater of Clifford Odets and ethnic plays which he had brought to the American stage (*The Dybbuk*, *The World of Sholem Aleichem*). Ironically, he achieved even greater critical acclaim in the "safe" field of Shakespearean theater.

Odets became suddenly "unpopular" and, if he is remembered for his writings during the depression, perhaps it is because the notorious writers' blacklist (which HUAC admirer Ronald Reagan denies existed) kept him from continuing to develop. Dashiell Hammett went to jail for contempt of congress. A recent biographical article published in Los Angeles expressed surprise that so many of the last years of his life were spent drinking at the typewriter without producing anything publishable. Hammett's experience with HUAC was never mentioned.

The play shows the developing history of the circus which was HUAC during its harassment of Hollywood and Broadway by presenting testimony as it was given. Lillian Hellman, Dashiell Hammett's life-long lover,

also appears. A literate, courageous letter of hers was read into the record in which she declares her willingness to appear, but condemns the committee for the harm it has done in forcing witnesses to "name names."

The entertainment industry slowly turned back the unctuous, heavy hand of HUAC beginning, perhaps, with Jose Ferrer. Without a trace of irony in his superbly-controlled voice he effusively praised the committee for running a "service" by which actors could clear their names and secure employment by the simple step of asking to appear before HUAC and its cameras. They simply stated that they were not Communists or, in the event that they had been, were merely aiding their fellow penitents by publicly stating their names.

The final actor to appear in the play is Paul Robeson. The great black athlete, sometime lawyer, outstanding actor and baritone had made his terrible statement about feeling like a free man (and not a despised descendant of slaves) for the first time in Russia. The statement, uttered in thoughtless zeal for the rights of American blacks, was to cause his passport to be withdrawn.

The charismatic Robeson, renowned for his courage, refused to apologize for his statement.

Rather than be drawn into arguing Stalin's genocidal policies or Soviet slavery, he baited the committee about the failure of congress to ensure equality for American blacks. A committee member allowed himself to be baited into admitting his belief as a member of congress it was his conviction that all blacks should be deported to some unspecified African destination. On this note the play concludes, HUAC having gone from being Christ-like (in its own estimation) to being a power for brutal repression and ruthless exploitation of the finances and reputation of a major American industry.