

# Are You Now or Have You Ever Been Political?



*Are You Now or Have You Ever Been*

By Bruce Bebb

It's not possible to parody the lower type of congressman when he's flaunting himself for attention. The reality of such vanity, arrogance, and brutish guile in action is so much like a comic-strip character it

could hardly be exaggerated. I'll never forget the first living specimen I observed up close. It was the fall of 1962, and he was being driven from one town to the next, stopping to tell anyone who would listen that he should be reelected to Nevada's only seat in the House of Representatives.

When his staff put together a rally on the baseball diamond of a park near my father's home in North Las Vegas, I suggested we go to it just to see what our public servant looked and sounded like. With visible reluctance, my father agreed, and we soon were standing in the free-hot-dog line next

to third base. The congressman, whose name I don't recall, planted his feet on home plate and started a rambling and obviously improvised harangue. I looked around at the slack faces in the listless crowd. Apparently it didn't matter that nothing he said amounted to anything, because nobody was really listening. They all knew where he stood. In those days the NAACP called Nevada "the Mississippi of the West" and our congressman was out to keep it that way. His posters identified him as a "Constitutional Democrat," which in politician's language meant he was against integration. Before he finished talking, a crap dealer named Bill who worked where my father and I did spotted us and came over, grinning, a half-eaten hot dog in one hand and a can of beer in the other. "Pretty good, huh?" Bill said. The congressman was reelected by what's called a healthy majority. In fact, he kept his position for several more terms.

**T**hat year the members of the House Committee on Un-American Activities were from Pennsylvania, Missouri, California, Louisiana, Virginia, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Wisconsin. Our man from Nevada wasn't among them, though nothing he ever said or did was opposed to the committee. The members of the HUAC varied over the years, but they were essentially alike in important ways, and in *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been*, the docudrama by Eric Bentley currently playing at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys, they have been condensed for dramatic continuity into a few figures. Their various names have been dropped, and in the text they are designated simply as the Chairman, CM1, CM2, and so forth.

The witnesses appear under their real names. Bentley's play is subtitled *The Investigation of Show Business by the Un-American Activities Committee 1947-1958*, and while it is the interpenetration of politics and show business, and the way each

to some extent transformed into the other, that gives the show contemporary interest, that piece also has an undeniable attraction as a rehash of juicy local gossip. When the Chairman (Martin E. Brooks in the production at the Back Alley Theatre) argues with Larry Parks (George De La Pena) about divulging former comrades' names, probably no one hereabouts cares that thirty-three years ago the chairman was Rep. John S. Wood of Georgia, but lots of us remember Parks as the star of *The Jolson Story* and *Jolson Sings Again*. More than that, his widow, Betty Garrett, is a highly regarded local actress and singer who recently appeared in productions at Theatre West and the Mark Taper Forum. When the committee members, particularly Frank Tavenner (here called Counsel, and portrayed with precise vigor by Michael Cavanaugh) bear down on Parks and frighten him into naming names, a feeling runs through the Back Alley Theatre of anger and humiliation, as though one of us is being publicly whipped into begging for mercy.

Other former local figures come forward to cooperate. Sterling Hayden (J. M. Jackson)—who later redeemed himself to some extent with the liberal community by opposing the Vietnam war, pointing out that in World War II he fought alongside Yugoslav partisans much like the Viet Cong and suggesting that the U.S. government was on the wrong side in Southeast Asia—tells the congressmen what they want to hear. For some reason the Back Alley version cuts out the passage from Bentley's play that quotes Hayden when he later blames his psychiatrist for his having "turned into a stoolie for J. Edgar Hoover." J. M. Jackson, who gives two of the best performances of the show (he also plays Jerome Robbins), conveys Hayden's ambivalence with admirable economy and realism.

**N**ot all of *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been* is presented in a realistic style. Although the acting is never

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less than professionally competent, a number of the actors satirize the people they are playing. Director Allan Miller portrays Abe Burrows in a twitchy, laugh-provoking interpretation, deliberately emphasizing Burrows's comic side, and John Medici shows us a cowering Jose Ferrer who is less than human; Sam Vincent's Elia Kazan is human but despicable.

It's a one-sided way of dramatizing the material. Although it's bound to appeal to the reverse nostalgia in the audience I think the show is aimed at, it's not as fascinating as it should be for the rest of us. HUAC was the embodiment of a number of forces and ideas worth thinking carefully about, and so was the Communist Party. In this tug-of-war between right and left both sides got rope burns. When Jose Ferrer testifies that he joined others in celebrating May Day without knowing what May Day was all about, it can be presented as documentation of Ferrer's gullibility, yet shown from another angle it could be evidence of left-wing opportunism. In spite of some people's memories to the contrary, the charge "Communist dupe" was not always empty and malicious. For us it's amusing to hear Abe Burrows describe attending a meeting in a sparsely furnished house on Crescent Heights Boulevard, yet when he testifies, "I would say I was *stupid*. . . I hate dictatorship. They tell you the means are justified by the end. I don't believe that. I don't believe you kill people for their own good," it isn't so funny.

**W**hen I suggested to Eric Bentley on the telephone last week that *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been* contained many passages that could be interpreted as critical of the Communist Party, he agreed. "No Communist country has ever done the play," he told me. But the right-wing South African government banned the play as well. It enjoyed a long run in London, and a translation was produced in Turkey, although the

Turks never paid the author the royalties due him. "I was approached by Swedish state television," Bentley said. The Swedes wanted to present a televised version if the playwright would "come up with more stuff about Reagan." When Bentley couldn't document the sort of shocking statements by Reagan the Swedes apparently wanted, the offer was withdrawn. A New York production was reviewed favorably in the *Daily Worker*, which subsequently received a slashing rebuttal by a survivor of the Hollywood Ten who referred to "Eric Bentley, the notorious anti-Communist."

And so it goes, back and forth, your reaction to the drama depending partly on the preconceptions you bring to it and partly on the interpretation decided on by the producers. The only comparable testing ground I can think of is *Marat/Sade*, in which Peter Weiss presents, like a brilliant spinning coin, both sides simultaneously.

**B**ack in the real world of the present, Eric Bentley and Elia Kazan see each other from time to time at the Actors Studio, and Bentley assures me that—although they don't bring up certain matters from the past—they are on cordial terms. In or out of the theater, a working life is full of compromises. I think it would be interesting, to say the least, to see what a production company sympathetic to HUAC could do with exactly the same text currently presented from such a sentimental slant at the Back Alley. Perhaps it would be no more illuminating than the garbled clichés I heard the Nevada congressman wheezing at his constituency; then again, it might be a much more intense and frightening glimpse of history. As it is, the current version seems like no more than another case of preaching to the converted. Feeling righteous about the distant past is equal to the wisdom of the Monday-morning quarterback. *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been* is still a fine show, but real politics are what can cost you your friends or your job *today*. ■