

# CALENDAR

LOS ANGELES TIMES MAY 20, 1984

## STAGE WEEK

### HUAC PLAYBACK AT BACK ALLEY

By LAWRENCE CHRISTON

**W**hat's on people's minds is what you have to work with."

The line is by playwright/critic Eric Bentley, one of our more luminous thinkers about the theater, and it ushers us into a theater week that's unusual in what it's beginning to suggest about 1984—that rather than being a year of submission to thought control, it's shaping up to be a year of heightened social consciousness.

Bentley was commenting about the latest production of his "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been," which opens at the Back Alley Theater Saturday. The play deals with one of the most infamous chapters in modern American history, the House Committee on Un-American Activities hearings of the early 1950s (the early days of the Cold War that is still with us and heating up monthly), in which a legitimately conceived govern-

ment search for anti-American Communist activists and sympathizers spread into a sinister and ruinous ransacking of innocent people's careers.

The current production is to some extent a reprise of the successful 1975 production at the Hollywood Actors Theater, which was produced by Actors for Themselves. Allan Miller was a principal then, and he returns now (he runs the Back Alley with his wife, Laura Zucker). "Allan is a kind of through line," Bentley said fondly. "He was in the original Yale Repertory production, which opened the day of Nixon's 1972 election, and he played it in New York.

"Are You Now" was culled from the actual transcript of the HUAC hearings. Bentley carefully affirms that not a word appears in the play that isn't a part of the record.

"I first became interested by accident," he said. "Through my association with Bertolt Brecht, I wanted to hear what he had to say to the committee when he was called to testify. His words could have made a Brechtian play of their own. I had them recorded on a 12-inch disc put out by Folkways. Viking Press heard it and was so impressed that they asked me to do a book. I did. It's called 'Thirty Years of Treason.' I had to boil a huge mass of paper work down to a thousand pages. After the book, I saw that there was a play in it as well.

Throughout I've kept it as accurate as possible. I told Allan I didn't want the use of the word *docudrama*, since none of this is fictionalized, as docudrama partly is. David Susskind wanted to buy the rights and leave the Elia Kazan portion out. 'He's a nice guy, and a friend,' he said. I said, 'Then that's just praising our friends and damning our enemies.'" Susskind didn't get the rights.

Could a comparable witch hunt happen today?

"It's hard to say," Bentley replied. "I think a lot of the substance could re-occur, but the form would change. Things are much blander now. Ronald Reagan is not McCarthy or Nixon. He's much smoother. But the pressures are there, to the extent they cut down on the National Endowment [for the Arts], for example. Even Nixon didn't touch that."

□