



LAURA CLARY/Daily Sundial

HUAC TARGET — Director Allan Miller plays satirist Abe Burrows, a witness in the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings.

'Are You Now' a mix of education and entertainment

By **LAURA CLARY**
Staff Writer

Eric Bentley's "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been" is not entertainment in the usual sense. It is a learning experience, a bit of American history transported to the stage.

The play, now showing at the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys, is both a reminder and a warning of the ease with which citizens are stripped of their Constitutional rights. It is also a terrifying revelation of how government can become master of the people, rather than servant.

"Are You Now or Have You Ever Been" is a dramatic re-enactment of testimony taken from the 1947-1956 hearings before the House Un-American Activities Committee during its investigations into possible Communist influence in the motion picture industry. Bentley edited and rearranged the actual testimony, but added no new dialogue.

HUAC is personified by a five-member

Committee, presided over by the menacing Chairman. The witnesses include actors Larry Parks, Lionel Stander, Paul Robeson and Sterling Hayden, and writers Elia Kazan, Arthur Miller, Lillian Hellman, Abe Burrows and Ring Lardner Jr.

The Committee alternately fawns on "friendly" witnesses and browbeats those who question HUAC's purpose and methods. These "unfriendly" witnesses face the choice of informing on friends or ending up on the Hollywood blacklist.

While there is no lack of emotional tension generated by this conflict between conscience and expedience, there is also no suspense. This is a problem inherent in historical drama, since the outcome is already known and cannot be in doubt.

The play's construction also negates any possible element of suspense. Committee assistants periodically come forward to announce new witnesses, the dates of their appearances before HUAC

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and other background information. This seriously disrupts the flow of the play and is a constant reminder that we are watching history rather than a drama.

These transitions could have been handled by having each witness duly sworn in, with background information becoming part of the Committee's questions. This would have preserved the flow and made it seem more like an actual hearing.

"Are You Now or Have You Ever Been" also lacks a clearly defined focus. Rather than a protagonist, it offers four major witnesses: Parks, Burrows, Stander and Robeson. Rather than an antagonist, it offers a Committee. The viewer does not have enough time to get emotionally involved in the plight of any one character. It is more like watching a parade than a play.

The play's faults lie in its construction and in a too literal transposition of history to the stage. Bentley has reproduced the HUAC hearings. But if art imitates life too closely, it ceases to be art and becomes life itself. Paradoxically, this too faithful reproduction of life seems less real in the theater than does fiction constructed specifically for the stage.

This is not to fault Back Alley's production. The direction is competent, and most of the cast give able performances. These good performances are an achievement in view of the fact that the actors are dealing with Congressional testimony that does not offer the characterization normally found in dialogue.

Noteworthy are director Allan Miller's humorous portrayal of Abe Burrows, Thalmus Rasulala as a dignified and impassioned Paul Robeson, Joe George in a caustic interpretation of Lionel Stander, and Martin E.

Brooks as the sanctimonious Chairman.

Some of the minor roles are overacted, particularly those played by actors handling multiple parts. This scenery chewing may be a compensation for the lack of characterization offered in the material.

The stark gray set, designed by George Becket, provides an appropriately formal hearing room that suggests the jail cells awaiting some of the "unfriendly" witnesses. Dawn Hollingsworth's lighting complements the set perfectly.

"Are You Now or Have You Ever Been" plays through Sunday at the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd. The production moves to the Victory Theatre, 3326 W. Victory Blvd., Burbank, on Sept. 20 and will run through Nov. 18. Show times at both theaters are Thursday through Sunday at 8 p.m., with a Sunday matinee at 3 p.m.