

You could spend days within 'Nights'

By Michael Lassell

A theater critic, even one who goes to the theater often, probably can count on the fingers of one hand the number of plays each year that refuse to leave the mind for hours and even days after the lights come up and the audience goes home. "Days and Nights Within," a two-person drama by Ellen McLaughlin now playing at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys, is one of the those rare plays.

Set in a prison in East Berlin between February 1950 and August 1951, the play focuses on Elsa Weber (Anna Katarina), a young communist who has been falsely accused by the party of being a spy for the Americans. Allan Miller (actor, playwright and a producing director of the Back Alley) plays the Interrogator, the man charged with securing a signed confession from Elsa.

Plays of this ilk are legion, but plays of this caliber are few, which undoubtedly is why this 80-minute exercise in excellence won the Great American Play Contest when it was produced at the 1985 Humana Festival at the Actors Theater of Louisville.

Foregoing all the cliches of its forerunners, and all of the usual sentimentality associated with the oppression of innocents, "Days and Nights Within" advances quickly in a series of short scenes. Some are snatches of the kinds of confrontations we have seen before, where the powerful inquisitor attempts to bully, cajole and otherwise entice a confession from an underdog who has fallen into the Kafkaesque cracks in the logic of totalitarian governments.

But McLaughlin refuses to rehash. She has invented new nooks and crannies and has filled them with remarkable nuance. And then, with impressive authority, she juxtaposes these scenes with others that consist of short monologues addressed by the two characters directly to the audience, and with snippets of dreams that resonate with such poetic intensity that even the alternating "realistic" scenes begin to take on a chilling surreality.

The technique draws us into the action; we cannot sit by passively. And because McLaughlin has foregone any pop Freudian psychology, we sink into some essential areas of the psyche that do not often see light.

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Anna Katarina plays the young woman falsely accused of being a spy in "Days and Nights Within."

and must be.

He is aided and abetted in this enterprise by his collaborators. Set designer Rich Rose has created a deceptively simple environment that looks on first glance like three walls and a tri-leveled floor. But he has created a prison of the mind on which lighting designers Leslie Rose and Ken Lennon have demonstrated just how effectively complex a lighting scheme can be even in a small theater. The lighting is wonderful. So is the sound design by Jerry Sider.

But all of it comes down to the actors and the relationship between them. Allan Miller, who directed an award-winning production of Eric Bentley's "Are You Now or Have You

These two actors on this stage create the kind of relationship that cannot be duplicated mechanically, because their live presence creates the sounding board on which the play's ramifications echo.

By the end of "Days and Nights Within," the play is no longer about this woman and this man in this place and time, but about a quality of relationship, a quality of logic, a quality of power and its abuse, that becomes symbolic of every such relationship in all times and places.

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A play that is predicated on the manipulation of dozens of interrelated vignettes needs a director of considerable skill, and "Days and Night" has found one. Michael Pressman has directed theater before ("To Gillian on Her 37th Birthday" at the Pañ Andreas Theater, for example), but his film credits are more extensive.

There is a great deal of similarity between what is happening in this play and what goes on in the best of screenplays, where visual imagery takes precedent over dialogue and where dialogue is somehow skewed away from day-to-day speech by truncating whole conversations into a line or two. Pressman proves adept at keeping the overall arc of the play intact while crystallizing each scene for what it is



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But all of it comes down to the actors and the relationship between them. Allan Miller, who directed an award-winning production of Eric Bentley's "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?" at the Back Alley two years ago, drives his cold and calculating interrogation in "Days and Nights" with the same logic of oppression that the minions of Joe McCarthy used in "Are You Now."

Swiss actress Anna Katarina possesses that rich maturity of emotion that seems so abundantly lacking in American actresses. Her vitality and variety and mesmerizing use of her voice and body hold us rapt, as does her refusal to sign a confession, come what may. The character is heroic (inspired, McLaughlin tells us, by Erica Wallach's book, "Light at Midnight") and the performance is thrilling.

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McLaughlin's achievement is that she has created a world of mythic density in a kind of play that would have overwhelmed a lesser playwright. She has refused to give in to the trite and demanded of herself the startlingly new. Her good fortune is to have been produced at the Back Alley in such a consummately theatrical and altogether intriguing way.

Michael Lassell reviews theater frequently for the Herald.

DAYS AND NIGHTS WITHIN, a play by Ellen McLaughlin, produced by Laura Zucker, directed by Michael Pressman, at the Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 8 p.m. Wed-Sat, 3 p.m. Sun. Tickets \$13-\$15. Information: (818) 780-2240.

Elsa Weber..... **Anna Katarina**
The Interrogator..... **Allan Miller**