

THE ARTS

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By Terry Fisher

She is the prisoner. He is the interrogator. She is a strong-willed yet fearful woman who is accused of spying. He is a lean, intense man with a Hitlerian mustache whose sole interest is doing his job and doing it well. They are adversaries in Ellen McLaughlin's *Days and Nights Within* which takes place in an East Berlin prison in the early 1950's and chronicles the year-and-a-half incarceration and questioning of Elsa Weber, a German woman who, as a student back in 1939, had been involved in the resistance, working for anti-Fascist and anti-Nazi groups.

When the play takes place, she is accused of being an American spy by her interrogator, who is identified only as being on the "other side." He wants her to confess her intelligence activities and name her collaborators. It is only later that we learn that some of these other "spies" have already been identified and executed. What he really wants from Elsa are the names or spies still unknown to him.

McLaughlin based *Days and Nights Within* on Erica Wallach's autobiographical *Light at Midnight*, which McLaughlin

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first read when she was 13. Her play won last year's Great American Play Contest at Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival. It operates on several levels: the helplessness of the prisoner who is completely at the mercy of her captor; the unsympathetic coldness of the questioner who holds all the power; the subtle shifts in the relationship between the two; the starkness of a compound which no one can penetrate and from which there is no escape.

Elsa insists she is innocent and that her lack of knowledge can only disappoint him. The interrogator bloodlessly responds, "No one that we take an interest in ever disappoints us." He details for her what her imprisonment will be like, and we see it unfold in short, compelling scenes. She is confined in a small, windowless cell where

the lights are always burning. She is constantly watched. She is deprived of sleep. The interrogations are relentless, taking place at any time of day or night.

Elsa is rent by hunger, isolation, longing for her family, mental torture and physical deprivation. She has dreams which range from frightening to comically bizarre.



Allan Miller and Anna Katarina in *Days and Nights*.

Despite Elsa's dependence on her interrogator, she never identifies with him, never sympathizes with him. There is no Stockholm syndrome here, but we do witness an intimacy of sorts between the two. Their destinies become intertwined as he grows dependent on her. He cannot succeed in his job unless she confesses, and he pleads with unseen superiors to be allowed to continue his interrogation. The questioning intensifies and the torture increases as the interrogator, bound up in Elsa's fate, resorts to stronger means. After seven months, he briefly allows her to see the sky for the first time. He produces a cigarette lighter which belongs to her husband. He tries to drive her to insanity, to suicide. When, broken and bewildered, she finally agrees to sign a confession, she can name no other names for him, and her confession is for naught. They are both in physical and spiritual limbo, from which there is no exit.

Days and Nights Within is powerful and gripping, both timeless and timely as it echoes the state of political prisoners everywhere, in the past and now. (Amnesty International sponsors post-performance discussions of the play on Wednesday evenings.)

The impact of the writing is heightened by the brilliant performances of Allan Miller as the complex, thwarted interrogator and particularly of Anna Katarina in the larger role of the tortured, courageous Elsa Weber. The stage crackles with their confrontations under Michael Pressman's taut, unsparing direction. His quick-change scenes build in intensity, ebb to softer moods and rise again to the final stunning moment. Rich Rose's stark set, the chill lighting of Leslie Rose and Ken Lennon, and Jerry Sider's resonant sound design contribute to the excellence of the production.

It reminds us how precious freedom is and how bitter is the plight of prisoners and hostages everywhere.

Days and Nights Within, Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; (818) 780-2240. Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m., through Nov. 30.

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