

THOUGHTS ON THEATER, as broadcast 10/25/84, on KCRW-FM,  
by DON SHIRLEY

This is Don Shirley, with Thoughts on Theater. Today I'll take a look at two shows that are about to close after relatively long runs. I'm sorry I haven't reviewed them before now, but there is at least one more weekend to catch either of them -- "Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been?", in the Valley, or "The White Crow," at L.A. Actors' Theatre.

"Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been?" is playing at the Victory Theatre in Burbank, after its initial run at the Back Alley Theatre, which produced it. It's a revival of one of L.A.'s biggest hits from the '70s -- Eric Bentley's stage adaptation of some of the crossfire from the post-war House Un-American Activities Committee hearings. Bentley focused on those transcripts in which the Committee sought to prove that the movies that were being churned out by the capitalists who ran Hollywood were in fact vessels for Communist propaganda.

It was a notion that seems so ludicrous in hindsight that it's easy to see how this is a very funny show. But at the time, of course, it was a notion that ruined people's lives, so there's also a measure of pathos hanging over "Are You Now." This quality is most effectively evoked in this production by the performance of George de la Pena as Larry Parks, one of the actors who named names only as a last resort, only after the committee had brought him to his knees. De la Pena's innocent little smile and tremulous voice are heartbreaking.

"Are You Now" would be an especially salutary show for someone who was born after all of these events had taken place. Though there's no actor playing Ronald Reagan, he is quoted in the show, and the younger voters who appear to be swept away by his current rhetoric should hear what he had to say back then; it makes his letter which was in the news this week, about John F. Kennedy's Marxist affiliations, easier to comprehend.

However, I should add that "Are You Now" is not completely one-sided. Occasionally we get to laugh at the left as well as at the right -- as when Jerome Robbins tells the committee how some of his comrades queried him about the dialectical materialism in his ballet, "Fancy Free." It seems clear that there were fools and knaves on both sides of the political fence; the only characters who emerged from the process with any dignity were those who refused to cooperate with the committee and eloquently explained why, such as Lillian Hellman and Paul Robeson.

It's a sterling revival of a fascinating show, directed by Allan Miller -- who also plays Abe Burrows. To borrow a phrase from that veteran foe of McCarthyism, Edward R. Murrow, see it now.

Bentley drew his material for "Are You Now" directly from the actual transcripts. Donald Freed, on the other hand, wrote an Adolf Eichmann play, "The White Crow," that's based less on the transcripts of Eichmann's trial than it is on the ruminations of the playwright. He takes us to a room in which

Eichmann is being interrogated by an Israeli intelligence agent. Under her questioning, Eichmann offers a variety of justifications for his deeds -- he was only following orders, the actual deaths were out of his jurisdiction, he personally believed that the Jews should have been sent to Israel rather than murdered, etc. He also seeks to equate his scrupulous attention to duty with that of the agent, and he makes the point that both the Jews and the Germans regarded themselves as chosen peoples -- in other words, the victims could easily have become the aggressors. The agent tries to break through Eichmann's mechanistic rationales to a human core, in search of a confession and the subsequent cleansing of the soul that would follow. But she doesn't quite break through, perhaps because she gets sidetracked in the second act with an abstruse discussion of Hitler's sexual habits, among other things.

Like much of Freed's work, "The White Crow" would probably be more interesting to read than it is to watch. Compared to his last opus, "Circe and Bravo," "The White Crow" is more coherent; most of the ideas are worth bringing up. But they still have to struggle through Freed's verbal fog in order to be seen. At the Actors' Theatre, the talk grows tiresome, despite the efforts of such fine actors as Gerald Hiken and Salome Jens, and despite the sharply focused courtroom set designed by Timian. On those few occasions when the characters try to express what they're thinking non-verbally, as in the final moments of the play, the message isn't clear -- at least not in this staging by Charles Marowitz.

That's Thoughts on Theater for today. Join me again next Thursday at 6:55. Until then, this is Don Shirley.