

HIS UNIQUE VIEW OF 'ARE YOU NOW'

By KIRK ELLIS

Lionel Stander's greatest performance was never seen by the general public. It was delivered behind closed doors before a congressional subcommittee on May 6, 1953.

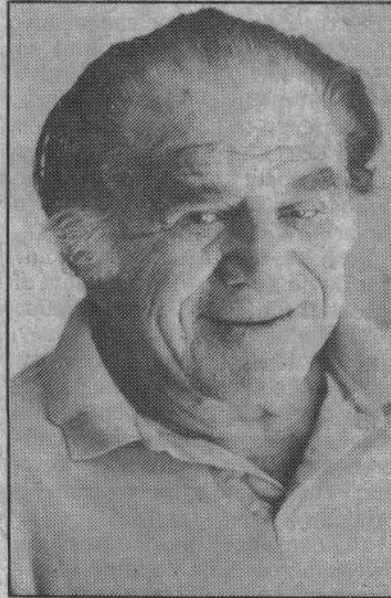
The man who is known today to millions of TV viewers as the garrulous chauffeur on "Hart to Hart" was one of countless performers blacklisted in the 1950s by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He was off the screen until 1963 ("The Loved One").

Standar's testimony before the committee, a blisteringly sardonic indictment of the tribunal's hypocrisy, provides a climactic turning point in "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been?" now holding court at the Victory Theatre in Burbank after an acclaimed four-month run at the Back Alley in Van Nuys.

"I think it's the best rendition the play's ever had," enthuses the 76-year-old Stander, whose razor-sharp recall was instrumental in helping to establish the production's authenticity. (Notes actor Joe George, Stander's on-stage alter ego, "Lionel gave us all a smell of the period's ambiance and taught us the art of contention—how to argue with the investigators without getting angry. Keeping your cool was important.")

Particularly gratifying to Stander are the many young faces he has glimpsed at performances. "I think the play should be required reading," he insists. "It teaches pungent, poignant lessons applicable today, especially in regard to the protection of our civil liberties."

The issue remains cloudy. Now, as then, Stander observes with



IAN DRYDEN / Los Angeles Times

Blacklisted actor Lionel Stander's HUAC testimony is turning point in "Are You Now . . .," now at Victory Theatre.

some misgiving, "Our basic freedoms are being subtly eroded by people professing to be 100% Americans—a strident minority calling themselves a majority."

Election-year platforms bear ample witness to the trend, Stander says.

"The historical wall that separates church and state is being attacked now," he says. "The idea of somebody telling you where and when to pray is contrary to the very principles of the Constitution."

Given such a political climate, Stander does not rule out the possibility of a second blacklist. "Most people today," he muses, "are nice, intelligent, wonderful. But 5% of them are lunatics. In a population of 200 million, that's 10 million lunatics. And when they all scream and yell, it gives a distorted view of our country."

And that, Stander warns, makes them the most dangerous subversives of all.