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AURELIO JOSE BARRERA



Allan Miller as Abe Burrows in "Are You Now"; rear left, Frank Aletter, John Medici, Sam Vincent.

## STAGE REVIEW

## 'ARE YOU NOW' STILL IS: POTENT DRAMA

**M**ental questions on the way to see Allan Miller's revival of Eric Bentley's "Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been" at the Back Alley Theatre: Will it still work?

Will those ignominious House Committee on Un-American Activities hearings of the 1950s, which are the basis of the Bentley docudrama, still carry dramatic clout?

Will the deeply un-American witch hunts, which caused an entire decade to become dubiously distinguished as the McCarthy Era, still have the dramatic force that made the play, based on those witch hunts, the longest-running Equity Waiver (and later Equity) show in 1975?

The answer, in all cases, is yes. In retrospect, that should have

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been predictable. Patriotic evangelism has been too strident in recent years for the pendulum not to swing. "Are You Now" could hardly have come back at a better time.

Yet even without this timing, as pure *theatre-verite*, it's a potent piece. The fact that, as we are informed at the beginning, no resemblance between the "witness" and the actual person is coincidental carries its own impact.

(For better or worse, protagonists wrote their own indelible lines; Bentley only edited actual transcripts into dramatic shape.)

The additional fact that so many of the "witnesses" are household names, that they came from this city, that a number of them are still

around—some vindicated, some still living down the confusion of their reactions—only heightens the immediacy of that impact.

It was, therefore, not too surprising Sunday to find a packed audience of the already-persuaded responding hungrily to the reconstituted events on stage. Can there be any other audience for such a politically charged piece? Not unless it is the young, who should come and learn from this how easily their—and our—constitutional rights can be eroded.

Allan Miller, who was one of the original three producers of "Are You Now" at the Cast Theatre nine years ago (creating the role of Abe Burrows that he here re-creates—hilariously), has directed this new

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## 'ARE YOU NOW OR HAVE YOU EVER BEEN'

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production, which is being performed on a gray set by George Becket that creditably suggests the hearing room as monument under Dawn Hollingsworth's functionally bright lights.

Miller's casting is strong, with particular commendation to his own performance as the twitching, fundamentally fence-riding, profoundly funny Burrows; to George de la Pena for a heartbreaking performance as Larry Parks, first and most tragic victim of these hearings; to Joe George for a blisteringly defiant Lionel Stander, telling the committee that, yes, he *did* know a bunch of subversives—all of *them*, and to Thalmus Rasulala for a Paul Robeson with more intelligence, dignity and insight in his pinky than in all the committeemen put together.

As director, Miller has made one strategic error: He has allowed his company to attack the words full bore. These are so powerful they should be allowed to speak for themselves. Restraint must prevail. It doesn't.

John Medici's Jose Ferrer pushes the unctuousness so broadly that it cancels itself out (though his Ring Lardner Jr. is right on target). Toni Sawyer, normally the essence of sobriety, tends to plug Lillian Hellman's now-famous letter to the committee, rather than simply to recite it.

Swept up in all this supercharge, the committeemen (boiled down to three by Bentley for purposes of dramatic expediency) also tend to overshoot their roles—in particular chairman Martin E. Brooks, who doesn't miss a single opportunity to overact.

Less problematic as his cohorts are Michael Cavanaugh and Byron Morrow (also re-creating his role from the 1975 production), who keep their tenseness mostly under control, or try to. Paradoxically, Brooks has a wonderful scene of uncontrollable laughter during one testimony that, for all its histrionics, happens to work. It would work twice as well if he'd keep a tighter lid on the rest of his performance.

Toning down the production should present no bigger problem than an extra rehearsal or two. Resisting an audience's encouragement to play high may be more difficult. There's a public out there that remembers both the hearings and this play about the hearings—and it clamors loudly for a bloodletting.

It must not be indulged. "Are You Now" can't be reduced to the level of a shouting match. The piece is as valid as it ever was and insists upon dignified indignation to remind us, in these newly confusing times, of the perils in the politics of intimidation.

The effect of fear on honorable people has never been better illustrated. Under such pressure, would any of us have done any better? When persecution passes for

patriotism, it's time to watch out. When informing becomes a point of honor, we're in trouble, and when valid resistance based on constitutional guarantees is viewed as treason, we're lost. "Are You Now" should be performed once every 10 years—as a reminder.

For now, it plays at 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys, Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m., Sundays at 3 and 8 p.m., until July 8 (851-2853).

### 'ARE YOU NOW OR HAVE YOU EVER BEEN'

A play by Eric Bentley, based on "Thirty Years of Treason," his own excerpts from the hearings before the House Committee on Un-American Activities 1938-68. Executive producer Laura Zucker. Director Allan Miller. Scenic designer George Becket. Lighting designer Dawn Hollingsworth. Assistant director Marshall New. Stage Manager Phoebe Sutton. Cast Martin E. Brooks, Michael Cavanaugh, Byron Morrow, Rick Manheim, Cameron Thor, Howard Honig, Sam Vincent, John Medici, George de la Pena, Frank Aletter, J. M. Jackson, Allan Miller, Toni Sawyer, Joe George. Thalmus Rasulala.