

# A moving 'Summer' & strong 'Are You'

Lahti shines in Tennessee Williams' drama;  
Rasulala is forceful in production at UCR

By T. E. FOREMAN  
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"Summer and Smoke" is not quite as popular as such other Tennessee Williams plays as "The Glass Menagerie," "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." But in some ways it is one of Williams' most enjoyable plays, as a current production at the Ahmanson Theatre of the Los Angeles Music Center bears out.

For one thing, "Summer and Smoke" is a more pleasant play than many of Williams' other works. True, it is not really a "happy" play, but it is not as tragic as many of his other works, nor does it have the grotesque touches that Williams indulged in more and more frequently in his later plays, beginning perhaps with "Night of the Iguana."

And there is a good deal of genuine humor in "Summer and Smoke," based on the fallibility of real people.

The essential story is a simple one of a minister's repressed, puritanical daughter, Alma, and her love for the young doctor next door, despite his free living and loose morals, which keep him from ever taking her seriously.

Through twists of fate, by the time she has overcome her repressions and is willing to meet the doctor on his terms, he has reformed and become straight-laced. It is, she observes wistfully, like two people who set out to call on each other and each finds the other not at home.

A sad little story, perhaps, but not a bitter one. And the ending, as played at the Ahmanson, leaves the possibility that Alma is going to find some kind of happiness after all.

Alma may be Williams' finest creation in his gallery of fading Southern belles, and she is brought beautifully to life in Christine Lahti's luminous performance. Lahti captures all the little nervous mannerisms that mark Alma's repressions, but she

## Theater Reviews

### "Summer and Smoke"

Ahmanson Theatre of the Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, Tuesday-Saturday at 8 p.m. with Thursday, Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2 p.m. through April 10. \$11-\$35. (714) 634-1300 or (213) 410-1062.

### "Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been?"

Presented by the Back Alley Theatre of Van Nuys at the University of California, Riverside.

shows us also the steel inside that makes Alma a more enduring person than the Laura of "The Glass Menagerie" or Blanche DuBois of "Streetcar."

Christopher Reeve as young doctor John gives a smooth and assured performance, although his characterization may not be quite what Williams had in mind, being perhaps a shade too gentlemanly, a tad bit too nice, at least in the doctor's rakehell persona.

Other cast members as directed by Marshall W. Mason are excellent, with Carol Barbee doing particularly well as the young woman who captures Dr. John's affections ahead of Alma.

The settings by John Lee Beatty are strikingly evocative of a lazy small Mississippi town, dominated by a brooding angel statue. They are effectively lighted by Dennis Parichy.

The House Un-American Activities Committee did a great deal of harm, to the entertainment industry and to America in general, in its more than a decade of supposedly investigating communist infiltration into American life. Whether it also did some good or not is arguable. It may have, but hardly enough to make up for the harm it caused.

As shown in "Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been," pre-



Ahmanson Theatre

### Christine Lahti and Christopher Reeve star in Tennessee Williams' "Summer and Smoke."

sented over the weekend by the Back Alley Theatre at the University of California, Riverside, the committee in its investigation of the movie industry did find that a number of movie people had at one time or another been members of or had taken an interest in the Communist Party.

But it also reveals that for most of these people their participation was only out of curiosity or misguided idealism, and that none of them ever posed any kind of a threat to the security of the United States.

Nevertheless, many of them went to prison and/or had their careers ruined as a result of the committee's witch hunting.

The play, taken verbatim from the hearings of the committee, shows various ways that movie stars and others appeared before the HUAC. Some, like Larry Parks, admitted their early party membership, however harmless, and saw their careers go down the drain. Some fervently denied membership. Some, like sinners repenting at the altar, not only confessed their activities and fervently sought forgiveness but eagerly named names of fellow participants.

And some, like Lillian Hellman in a letter and Paul Robeson in person, told the committee to go to hell.

It makes for strong theater as presented by the Back Alley Theatre, a Van Nuys company that has presented "Are You Now . . ." in two previous long Los Angeles runs and is currently taking it to colleges and universities like UCR.

To one who saw both of their previous productions the present one seems still powerful, but the committee chairman and members have become a bit too strident. Also on the nit-picking side, John Medici as Jose Ferrer is a bit too comically theatrical and Alan Miller as Abe Burrows is too much of a buffoon, but otherwise everyone is fine.

Rick Manheim as Parks, slowly going to pieces before the committee, is particularly moving. Riverside attorney Kathryn Kirkland read Hellman's letter stirring. But the evening's strongest performance was by former Riversider Thalmus Rasulala as Robeson, capturing Robeson's towering presence and majestic voice as well as his powerful righteous anger.