

BY THOMAS ROCHE

ARE YOU NOW OR have you ever been? The question is more than an existential one. It can be an intensely political one. In

the 1940s and '50s, a wave of anti-communist paranoia placed thousands of actors, writers, and other citizens on the stand, repeatedly demanding: "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist party?"

Are You Now or Have You Ever Been is writer Eric Bentley's distillation of over 5000 subpoenaed witnesses' testimony—including that of entertainers like Larry Parks, Lillian Hellman, and Arthur Miller—before the House Un-American Activities Committee, or HUAC. Allan Miller's acclaimed Back Alley Theater will present the play at UCSC's Barn Theater April 16.

Miller and Producing Director Laura Zucker created Back Alley Theater in 1979, and have both been involved with *Are You Now* since its original production at Yale in 1973.

For Bentley, *Are You Now* is not about McCarthyism and not about Communism, but about the relationship between an individual and his or her identity. "The play asks: 'Can you face yourself when you do certain things?'" said Bentley. "It's about one's attitude to one's self."

During the "Red Scare" of the

1940s and '50s, the HUAC was the strong arm of the inquisition. It operated as a permanent congressional committee from 1945 until its dissolution in January 1975. In its lifetime, the HUAC published 50,000 pages of transcripts, mostly interrogations of suspected communists and possible informants. Though the HUAC never once found sufficient evidence to indict anyone, many of its witnesses were blacklisted whether or not they had ever had any connection with the Communist Party. Many never worked in show business again.

Allan Miller, who directs *Are You Now* and portrays Abe Burrows, a witness before the committee, finds the play all the more exciting for its base in history. "We feel like a living part of American history. I can't imagine any writer writing this." "I've never seen it once that I haven't asked myself how I would have reacted," said Producing Director Zucker.

Are You Now dramatizes much of the absolute and freewheeling power HUAC members enjoyed when interrogating witnesses. When Miller and Zucker performed *Are You Now* at the Ford Theater in Washington in the mid-seventies, they were invited to visit the Watergate proceedings. Miller was astonished at the parallels he saw between the Watergate hearings and the ones he was used to performing. "The investigators could say anything, do anything, behave any way they wanted with congressional impunity."

The timeless quality of the play's issues have apparently had a

consistently powerful effect on the play's company. "I held auditions for six months," Miller said of *Are You Now*'s Los Angeles auditions in late 1974. "It was very hard to find actors willing to play these parts. We had a terrible time finding a theater—no theater wanted to take us. It was incredibly difficult getting people to commit to this project."

At that time, the HUAC was still in existence. When the Los Angeles production was finally under way, Miller says the cast "thought our careers were over. My agent warned me: 'Don't do this.' We thought we might be blacklisted. But much the reverse happened."

The first LA show came in February of 1975, one month after the dissolution of the House Un-American Activities Committee. *Are You Now* helped bring Zucker and Miller international recognition rather than blacklisting.

Are You Now or Have You Ever Been is about fear, McCarthyism, and oppression in a free society. But Eric Bentley sees the events of the play as symbolic of the need to take a stand on one's identity.

"For me, the important part of the play is the broadly human theme, rather than the political one." He points out that there are no ellipses in the title; it is a complete question. "Are you now or have you ever been—are you prepared to affirm or deny your existence?"

Are You Now Or Have You Ever Been appears in the Barn Theater Saturday, April 16. Tickets are \$9 general, \$5 students. For information call 429-2159.

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