

Come Judgment Day

by Phil Brandes

Are You Now or Have You Ever Been? Written by Eric Bentley. Directed by Allan Miller. Presented by the Back Alley Theatre, this Saturday, October 17, 8 p.m. at UCSB Campbell Hall. 961-3535.

It is March 21, 1951. Actor Larry Parks testifies before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigating Communist Party membership in the entertainment industry. His career is ruined because of his own prior communist affiliation. Parks squirms like a partly crushed insect resisting repeated pressure to supply the names of other Party members. No mercy is shown as the interrogation continues, and finally, the last shreds of human dignity abdicated, outlining the names. When it is over, a Congressman advises Parks to take comfort from the fact that the people he has listed have already been subpoenaed by the Committee, and their appearance would not be the result of his testimony. A broken Parks replies, "It is no comfort whatsoever."

It is a scene drawn from the annals of both drama and real life, courtesy of Eric Bentley's stage condensation of the actual HUAC hearing transcripts. *Are You Now or*

Have You Ever Been. This theatrical window into one of the least examined witch hunts in our country's history will be presented in a single performance on Saturday, October 17, 8 p.m. at UCSB's Campbell Hall by the Back Alley Theatre, the Los Angeles-based company that has enjoyed two record-breaking runs and extensive tours with the piece.

Through the testimony of numerous Hollywood notables, including Abe Burrows, Elia Kazan, Lillian Hellman, Paul Robeson, and Arthur Miller, the docudrama brings us face to face with the climate of fear and suspicion in the film industry engendered by the HUAC between 1947 and 1958. Initially set up to investigate Communist infiltration in all labor unions, the hearings laid the groundwork for the better-known McCarthyism and continued to ruin careers and stifle social commentary in the arts long after Tail Gunner Joe had gone into his final tailspin.

Back Alley Theatre's Artistic Director, Allan Miller, points out that "A Congressional committee, as portrayed in this play—and it's still true today—has unbridled powers. You can say anything in these hearings. There is no cross examination, no confirming of facts—anything that is said can go into the record. That's

a very strange thing in our civilized state of fairness, equality, and democracy."

Miller sees *Are You Now* as "a devastating document about how power is wielded by people who get hungry for power, and this committee had incredible power. Careers were done—if you questioned the Committee's right in any way what-soever, or if you didn't tell the names of anybody you knew who was involved in any organizations that they named as Communist, then you were a suspect and usually you couldn't work unless you recanted later on. Many people refused to testify about anyone else other than themselves, and then, because they couldn't work, they came in and started naming other people. That was always the issue: Will you name other people? They didn't even want to know if you were a Communist, they really wanted you to say who else was a Communist. And they had informants all over the place."

Despite the hysteria, and the impact on tens of thousands of lives, no criminal offenses were ever uncovered by the HUAC probe into the entertainment industry. Only the famous Hollywood Ten were indicted for refusing to answer the Com-

mittee's questions on the basis of the First Amendment.

Miller has been involved in every production of *Are You Now* since its 1972 premiere at Yale, where he was on staff. His continuing fascination with the piece stems from "the range and variety of experiences expressed in this play. No other piece of historical material in any theater literature that I've ever read captures such an incredible range of what people will do under pressure."

Miller plays one of the witnesses, satirist Abe Burrows, in whom he admires "the incredible humor he uses when he's in danger. The jokes, the things he does to keep the pressure from building on himself. I'd never seen such a tightrope act. The character's need to be loved and liked when these people are there trying to hammer him into the ground just fascinates me."

Miller also directs this production, which features 10 professional actors best known for their film and TV work. Miller says one of his directing goals is to create the feel of a real-life drama. "We play to the audience a lot—they're like the people in the hearing room, that's the way I've designed it. And every

audience response is different.

When we did it in Washington D.C., it was like a political tennis game. They didn't care who won or lost, they just cared who scored. In Washington they're so used to careers coming up and going down that someone losing their livelihood mattered very little to them, but who had the best *bon mot*, the best jibe, the best retort—they got applauded the most."

"In Hollywood, the response is visceral, it's gut wrenching. Some people come backstage who had been involved in it, and they just stand there so full of emotion that they find it difficult to even talk or say 'thank you.'"

"If there is a message Miller would most like us to carry away from this play, it would be: 'Keep watching the skies. Remember the end line in *The Thing*. Keep watching out for these things. Don't let people get away with doing it, not anywhere or any time. It's just like you see someone being beaten up in the street and you walk on by—it's going to happen to you one of these days. If you don't stand up for other people's rights to think and speak, you're going to doom and damn yourself.'"