

STAGE REVIEW

An Ordeal by HUAC

BY DAN SULLIVAN
Times Theater Critic

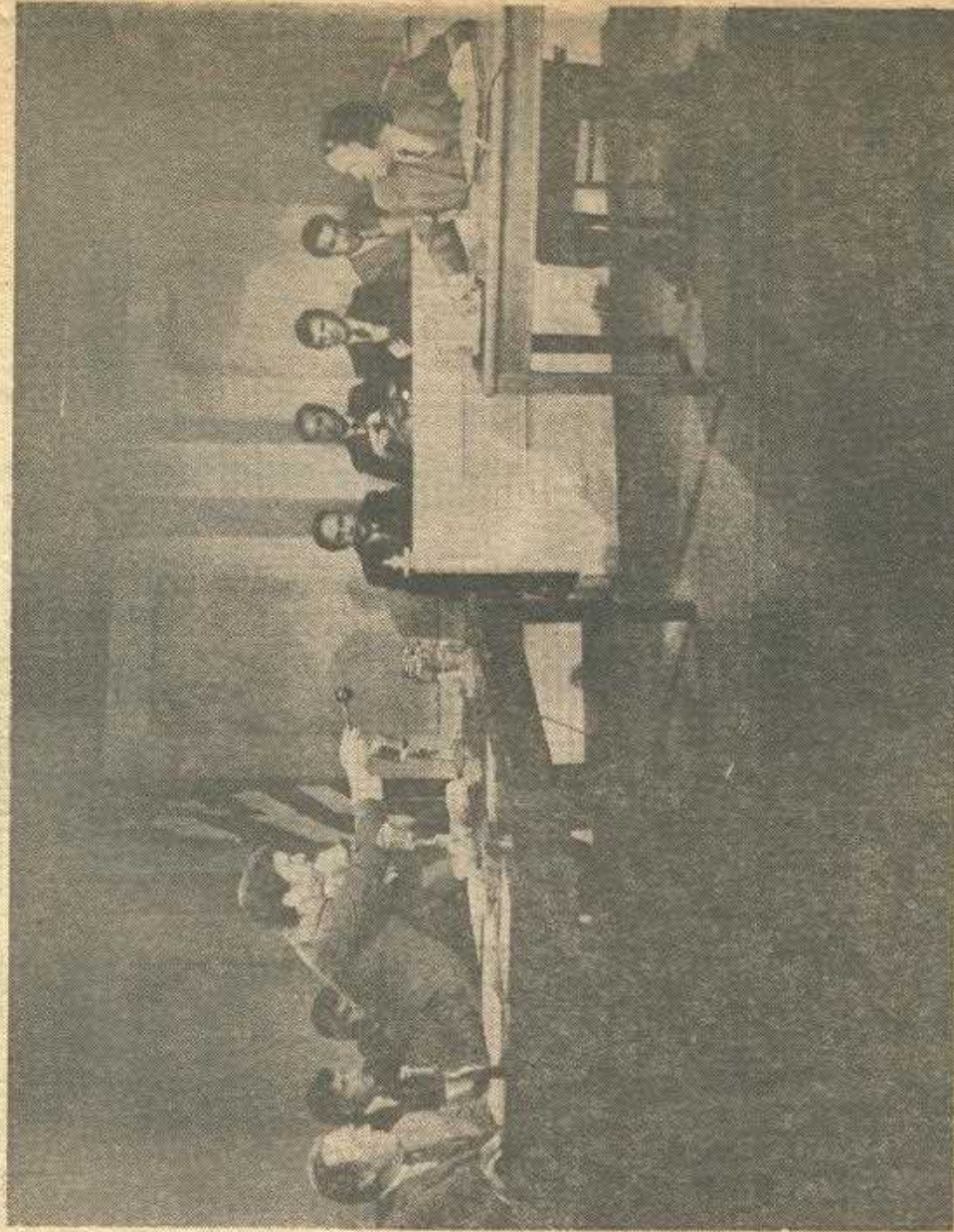
The names, we are reminded at the outset of "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been" at the Cast Theater, are not coincidental. This is what Elia Kazan, Abe Burrows, Lillian Hellman, Paul Robeson, etc., actually said to the House Un-American Activities Committee 25 years ago when "invited" to speak about communism in show business.

This is Larry Parks caving in, Arthur Miller sitting tight and Lionel Stander telling the honorable gentlemen where to put it. But the purpose of Eric Bentley's documentary drama carved from his mammoth collection of on-the-record HUAC testimony, "Thirty Years of Treason," is not to make certain witnesses look bad or good. It is to present the committee as, itself, one of the more un-American activities of our time.

It succeeds in this. We find ourselves sitting in a court where a "witness" is, in effect, a defendant against a devastating but unspecific charge of disloyalty to his country. He is not allowed to cross-examine his accusers or to call his own witnesses. His chief prosecutor is also the presiding judge. His testimony will be heard by the whole nation, which, moreover, assumes that he must be guilty or *why would he be up there?*

It is all very familiar. We think of Kafka. We think of the Stalinist trials of the late 1930s (the penalties much less severe here, of course—job loss but not death). We

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THEATER-OF-FACT—John Lehene as HUAC chairman takes accusatory stance against Al-

len Garfield as Lionel Stander. Emmet Walsh, left, plays chief investigator in Bentley drama.

Times photo by Marianna Diamos

HUAC ORDEAL

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also may think of the Watergate hearings. If it is wrong to put an Arthur Miller through this, it is right to put a John Mitchell through it? The questions raised by the evening cut several ways. HUAC isn't all it's about.

Psychologically, it is about what fear—put it more politely: pressure—does to people. William Devane's production of the play at the Cast is, I should say immediately, superb. And one of the reasons it is superb is its skill in showing us what each witness is going through, without making a judgment on him. It will leave that to us, with this question: How would we look up there?

David Spielberg as Larry Parks, for instance (the cast is so well matched that you could pick almost anyone to make the point), absolutely defies categorization. He is simply a nice young man without the considerable resources needed to look the United States government in the eye and say, finally: No. "I'm asking you not to press me on this," he pleads time after time as the committee demands the names of others in Parks' Hollywood "cell" (whose chief activity seems to have been coffee parties).

But in executive session (later made public) he does give a few names, his hand over his mouth as though to deny the act even as he completes it. The committee then assures him that they have heard all the names before... if that's any comfort. "It is no comfort at all," Spielberg whispers. The impulse is to tiptoe away and leave him by himself.

Although somewhat softer than Bentley's original script, this is not a sentimental production. One is not edified by the small-change brought to the committee by certain witnesses in hopes of proving their patriotism—Kazan's (Angelo Gnazzo) citing of a play he once did about a priest; Jerome Robbins' Beeson Carroll speaking of the "American quality" of his dances. The actors let these statements speak for themselves and they do. As do the comical but basically desperate remarks of Abe Burrows (Alan Miller). HUAC did not bring out the best in people. Panic is the general theme here.

Some people didn't yield to it. Jeff Davis's Arthur Miller is an icicle, Ethel P. O'Connell's Lillian Hellman a rock. "I will not cut my conscience to this year's fashions. To hurt innocent

people whom I knew many years ago in order to save myself, is inhuman and indecent and dishonorable." Self-righteousness is the actors' problem here. Both avoid it by projecting an anger so hot that it looks cold.

There were other methods of dealing with the committee. Stander (Allen Garfield) turns the hearing into a comedy, pretending to forget who the hell he was married to in 1935 and suggesting pleasantly, that, yes, he does know a bunch of creepy subversives: you guys. Paul Robeson (Charles Weldon) virtually plays with the committee, so far ahead of them in class and political sophistication that in the end he almost seems to be excusing them from going on.

It is an almost Chaucerian look at human nature in a corner, and this definitely includes the committee, reduced for dramatic purposes to three. M. Emmet Walsh as the chief investigator asks questions like a dull nurse taking a medical history. Ever been a Communist? Ever had mumps? John Lehne as the chairman plays an iron-jawed, self-infatuated Mister District Attorney sworn to protect these shores from all enemies foreign and domestic. Byron Morrow as a committeeman is your white-haired father image, sympathetic but slightly prurient. All of Washington is there.

As director, Devane keeps the tone faultless, the action moving ahead, the actors always thinking and al-

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ways in true interplay. It is of how theater-of-fact, or a ter, should be done. The criers of the Cast, turned into room by Barry Robison, give experience a special intensity actors and audience. Some of the references between Bentley's and this arrangement can be questioned but that can wait other time. "Are You Now, You Ever Been" is an absorbing, whatever your politics.

Performances at 8:30 p.m. days through Sundays at 8. Centro: 462-0265. Through M.