

# Play deals with era of 'red' hearings

By SUSAN SPERLING

In 1947, the American House Committee on Un-American Activities announced that "Hollywood is one of the main centers of Communist activity in America." Accordingly, the Committee, under the chairmanship of House Representative J. Parnell Thomas, began to search Hollywood for Communists, who, it was feared, were infiltrating the United States from all corners.

That committee, and its Hollywood dealings, is the subject of a play by Eric Bentley. *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been*, which was first produced in 1972, is now at Toronto's Leah Posluns Theatre until February 22 for its Canadian premiere. Directed by Leah Posluns' artistic director Reva Stern, *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been* traces the committee's activities from 1947 to 1958, and centres on the persecution of Hollywood actors, writers and directors.

Bentley's script is not a script in the usual sense, as the dialogue is taken directly from actual hearing transcripts, with a bit of narrative thrown in between scenes. While Bentley is well known as a critic, playwright and translator, writing *Are You Now* seems to have been more of an editorial challenge for him, as his job was mainly to decide which transcripts from which hearings should be put into his play.

This technique works rather well. Often the dialogue seems unbelievable, yet one must take note of the fact that the lines are real: poor dialogue is not the fault of the writer in this case, but rather the fault of those who originally said the words. However, the narration at times is confused as different characters take up the narration at different times, in no logical sequence.

The play takes place in one room, which is set up to look like a courtroom in the 1940s. From the pillars to the tables and the old-fashioned microphones, the set is authentic. For the sake of clarity, one committee oversees all the proceedings, rather than the several committees that were actually used over the years. The committee is wonderful. Derek Keurvorst, who portrays the investigator, uses a chilling Lyndon Johnson accent whenever he asks the main

question of the play: "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?"

This question is repeated many times over, and is asked of actors portraying such luminaries as Larry Parks, José Ferrer, Elia Kazan, Abe Burrows, Arthur Miller, Zero Mostel and Paul Robeson.

Most of the first act centres on the questioning and subsequent breakdown of Larry Parks, a 1940s actor. In reality, Parks was the first to willingly testify and the first to name names in front of the Committee. Unfortunately, Gerry Salsverg, the Toronto actor who plays Parks, is not convincing enough to elicit sympathy for his character. During the breakdown scene, which is supposed to be the emotional climax of the first act, Salsverg's crying sounds more like laughing and cannot be taken seriously.

The second act is far better. The testimony given is more interesting and the actors are, for the most part, convincing. Abe Burrows, an old-time comedian and playwright, is portrayed with alarming accuracy by Canadian actor, director and screenwriter R.D. Reid. Burrows' testimony was filled with humor and sarcasm, and Reid had the audience laughing aloud at all the right



Harriet's cruising off to the meat market for reading week. Little does she know the tanning ain't so hot.

moments. Only two other actors in the entire play really stood out. One was American actor Gene Mack, whose portrayal of black Communist singer and activist Paul Robeson elicited audience sympathy, not just for his character, but for the whole Communist cause.

Also superb was Peter J. McConnell, who played the chairman of the committee and was onstage the entire time. McConnell's acting was excellent, but more noteworthy than that was his resemblance to US President Ronald Reagan. Whether this resemblance was intentional or not, it came off as a beautiful caricature of the American right wing faction, sending the play's message home.

That message was obviously an historical one, but more than that, it gave the audience a renewed awareness of the dangers of so-called witchhunts, such as the Communist hunt of the 1940s and 1950s, and, on

a lesser level, the homosexual hunt of today that is going on in Hollywood out of fear of AIDS. Through actual historical documentation and through several outstanding performances, the play causes the audience to think about the lack of social justice involved in any sort of persecution.

However, there was one major flaw of the play, a flaw in the writing. There was an almost total absence of females, except for a very short and unimportant appearance by Marilyn Stone in the role of Lillian Hellman. This absence is not because of an historical absence of females in the committee's activities, as many females were named by those questioned. One wonders why Bentley left out the women, especially Karen Morley, whose name was mentioned in connection with the Communist Party by at least five different characters.



A final interesting aspect of the play was the music and the slides that accompanied the breaks in the action. During every break, the music of the Communists, especially Paul Robeson's songs, were filtered in through the speakers, and slides from that era were flashed on three large screens in the background. Unfortunately, some of the slides were unclear, and all were flashed too quickly for them to be absorbed by the audience.

However, it was a nice touch of sentimentality, which helped to set the mood for an overall interesting and very educational piece. A final note to anyone who sees the play: although the first act tends to be on the tedious side, stick it out for the last half—it's well worth it.

## Risky Rhubarb runs the gamut

By STEPHEN MILTON

Having exhausted the dinner theatre circuit, and sold the last of your albums to the second-hand record dealer for a return to "Cats," the student theatre-goer is confronted by redundancy and boredom. Enter the annual appearance of the Rhubarb! festival at the Tarragon Theatre's Extra Space, which offers one of the only reliable venues for exposure to experimental theatre in the city.

The Rhubarb! festival was first conceived in 1979 as a conscious attempt to provide writers and performers with an opportunity to experiment with non-traditional theatrical forms in front of an audience. Unlike many productions, the Rhubarb! festival is more concerned with the performers' experimentation than its reception by the audience, thereby creating a climate of artistic freedom unencumbered by financial restraints. The festival is sponsored by Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, under the leadership of its artistic director, Sky Gilbert, a graduate of York's Theatre Department.

This year the festival is presenting

a spectrum of plays which will be staged over the course of three weeks. Last weekend saw the first installment which was comprised of four performance art pieces. This weekend, from February 12 to the 16th, the festival will be featuring a number of plays which meld theatre and performance art. Finally, from February 19 to the 22nd, Rhubarb! will finish with five plays which are more traditional in form, although not in content. In addition, there will be special performances at 11:00 on regular performance nights, although one should check with the Tarragon for precise dates.

Rhubarb! will be giving a number of York graduates and students an opportunity to stage their more experimental work for the city's theatre audiences. During the second week, two of the plays to be performed will be the work of current York students. Playwright Alma Subasic's "Initiation Rights" will be featured, as well as the work of Mike and John Erskine-Kellie. The latter two students are brothers, and will be performing four short pieces which were originally part of "The Oral Stage," first performed

last December at Glendon. Their work involves live action as well as media work, as in "Dante's Vacation," where the brothers portray Dante and Virgil as tourists in hell, acting against the backdrop of projected illustrations from *The Inferno*. All of the pieces in their quartet are short, and occupy that space where theatre and performance poetry intersect.

In week three, (February 19-22) the festival will be featuring the work of two York graduates, in a series of plays that will more closely resemble standard theatre in form. Robyn-Marie Butt, a graduate of the creative writing program will have her play "Fred's Death" staged, as will York theatre grad, Coleen Subasic with "Back Alley Boys," a play dealing with punk life in Toronto.

Finally, if the prospect of experimental theatre conjures up no firm vision in your head, you might take note of the press release's assurance that no foray into the avant garde would be complete without full frontal nudity. Something to keep in mind when your parents ask what they should see next.

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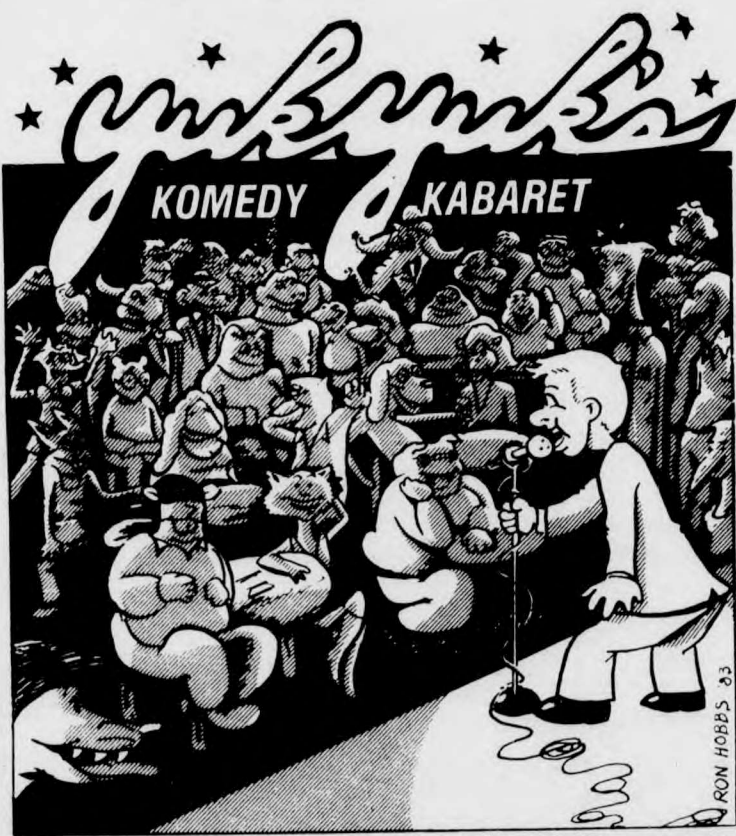
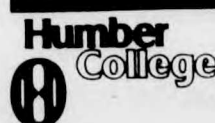
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