

It was a time of innocence, it was a time of fear

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1951. Musical theater piece conceived and directed by Anne Bogart. With Mark Auslin, Edward Baran, Catherine Coray, Ryan Cutrona, Karen Evans-Kandel, Jonathan Fried, Henry Stram, Karen Troff and Randolph Zinn. Music by Michael S. Roth. Lyrics by Mac Wellman. Set by Sarah Bonnemaison; costumes by Walker Hicklin; lighting by Carol Mullins. At the Perry Street Theater.

IT OPENS WITH A '50s-STYLE high school sock hop, and closes with the same characters—a few years older but just as innocent, dressed in their best—at what seems a high school prom. The play is called "1951," and even though it looks back on what seem now carefree days, "1951" is an unsentimental view of those somewhat sentimental years.

The play focuses on the House Un-American Activities Committee and its investigative actions during that year. The committee was most anxious to ferret out Communists in this country, specifically in the entertainment industry.

One after another, actors and writers were called to testify, although to testify meant revealing the names of others involved. Some refused to do so; others were browbeaten into naming names.

It's a subject books have been devoted to, plays have been written about and films have been made from. This time, it is being tackled by Anne Bogart, a playwright/director with an unusual vision, and set to music by Michael S. Roth and Mac Wellman.

Besides playing the innocent high school students, the cast also portrays the celebrities who came under interrogation: Sterling Hayden, Lillian Hellman, Lionel Stander, Larry Parks, Clifford Odets, Zero Mostel, Jerome Robbins and others. Other figures from the time are also shown: Howard Hughes, Walt Disney, Louella Parsons, Ayn Rand.

The play uses some actual testimony for dialogue as it attempts to explore the effect of the era's political events on the lives of the generation of artists born after the war.

But the work uses too many people to make its point. Actors step in and out of roles and costumes like pictures in a photo album.

Yet Bogart has done an excellent job moving her characters, and motivating them. Jonathan Fried even looks like Sterling Hayden and Louella Parsons at the same time; Ryan Cutrona, as Larry Parks, is strong and weak at the same time. The play is most effective in showing the disintegration of a Parks under questioning, or the insouciance with which a Mostel turned questions back on the questioners.

The music is a mixture of period numbers, recordings and new music. It, too, is effective.

DAILY NEWS

NEW YORK'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER®

Wednesday, May 28, 1986



QUESTION AND ANSWER TIME: Henry Stram (top) and Jonathan Fried in "1951"