theatres:
The Catonsville Nine trial

By Alex Makowski

Relevant political issues have formed the substance for several theatrical productions over the past few years. The gradual public awakening over the Vietnam War, particularly among the college-educated people who form the large majority of the audience for plays, made financially realistic attempts by playwrights to use an entertainment medium to carry social and political commentary.

Among the newest plays in this genre is The Trial of the Catonsville Nine, now playing at the New Theatre in Harvard Square. The production deals with the courtroom trial of nine "radical Catholics" who seized several hundred 1-A files from a Selective Service office in Maryland, soaked them in water, and burned them. The incident and subsequent trial made national figures of the Bergin brothers, the two arti- culate priests who provided much of the leadership for the band. Dan Bergin, the younger priest who led the FBI on a four-month chase around the country following his sentence, wrote the play.

There are three ways to consider this work. On the most basic level, we could deal with its entertainment value, the surface qualities that determine whether the play is worth a Saturday evening and the price of admission. Beyond that we could look to the play's actual plays it on current social and political events. Finally, we could interpret and evaluate the political message Bergin offers, the document, by his fellow Americans.

Both for its style and its content, Catonsville is vaguely reminiscent of another political play that came through Boston two years ago, in the Matter of J. Oppenheimer. Oppenheimer was the brilliant theoretician who led the government during World War II in head the atom bomb project. During the McCarthy era he was stripped of his secret clearance and had to use the same stark courtroom set- ting; both use the dialogue of a history trial to bring out for the audience the background and issues involved. And both plays succeed in providing a pleasant vehicle for their mes- sage.

The acting in Catonsville is impressive - the roles, after all, are more interesting than usual - and there is nothing but Richard Benjamin's and the prosecutorial roles that required a bit more finesse, but the acting worked fairly well and was a testament to a faithful interpretation of Bergin's script.

The commentary the two plays had to offer was somewhat similar. Oppenheimer dealt with the persecution of the early fifties, Bergin with the con- sequences of McCarthy's brand of demagoguery and anti-communism. Bergin considers the more contemporary climate surrounding the Vietnam War. He considers the American foreign policy during the Vietnam War, the current status of the mony of the nine offers graphic illustration of anti-communism, and his attempt to suppress revolutionary movements in Latin America.

Most of the Catholics had done missionary work abroad and had seen the poor lot of peasants in Guatemala, the consequences of American military and economic intervention in Latin America and Africa, and at home. Dan Bergin himself has been to Haiti with 8U professor Howard Zinn and suffered an American bombing att- tack.

Many Americans, the play points out, are unaware of the suffering of these people. In the play, for instance, the judge is brought to the scene of the bombing (supposedly accidental) of villages by Americal planes in the Philippines and in Uganda. Dan Bergin himself has been to Haiti with BU professor Howard Zinn and suffered an American bombing at- tack.

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The crucial issues can be framed in the standard argument over civil disobedience. To what lengths may dissidents go before society may, with jus- tification, put a stop to their protest? How much of a sanc- tion does moral or religious sin- cerity provide? How do you determine when a government is no longer responsive to the will of the people?

On these issues we must con- clude that Catonsville is rather one-sided. The Catholic radicals' arguments are buttressed with a reasoned, documented, elo- quent, and particularly convinc- ing style. Finally, there is no contrast to the feeble attempts at response on the part of the prosecutor and Judge. For the sake of dramatizing his cause Bergin has sanctified the intellectual strength of his position, failing to answer the arguments available that challenge the fervor of the nine's beliefs.

For example, during the trial Bergin attacked the poder to make tradition and the law more responsive to the needs of the people. The judge's reply is weak compared with the possible re- sponse of demanding how the nine presume to represent "the people." The rules of law, he might have argued, was set up in this country to provide some checks against the police, thereby demonstrating their desires, and moral conviction may be a pragmatic test for a more substantial in- demonstration of support by Americans. The simplistic "You can't take the law into your own hands" is hardly the response. The audience might expect a judge pressed to defend the va- lidity of his position on the bench.

Indeed, the whole trial is something of a paradox. On the one hand the nine insist that they want the rigorous treat- ment of the laws and the court: they neither expect nor desire mercy or special treatment. Yet throughout the trial they insist on stating positions or developing arguments that have no bearing in a court of law. Since the defendants did seem sincere when they said they would sacrific- e their freedom and liberty to dramatize their opposition to the war and somehow hinder in operation, since the defendants did admit they had taken the files and put them to the torch, since the defendants did insist on rigorous treatment, one won- der why they pleaded not guilty to the charges against them.

Suppose that the usual step of asking the judge to rely on his conscience and throw the prosecution's case out of court? Apparently it is pos- sible for a judge to screw up his ju- rory to return a finding of not gaily. This would certainly have been far more effective than the martyrdom of a few christians in the morality and legality of the war. I found this prospect tantalizing, and Bergin might have explored it in Catonsville.

There can be no denying ei- ther the entertainment value of Catonsville or the relevance of its social commentary. Students and faculty still concerned about the Vietnam War would find the play a refreshing and unique treatment of both the conflict itself and the domestic oppos- ition that has developed. Perhaps bit more competitive with ad- ministration charges at local move- theatres. But it should no doubt provide a full audience. CHINA CINEMA

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