

# CALENDAR

LOS ANGELES TIMES NOVEMBER 22, 1987

## BABBITT AND FRIENDS



*In the tradition of Orson Welles and the celebrated Mercury Theater, a new collective of Hollywood actors called the Los Angeles Classic Theatre Works will perform a 14½-hour radio dramatization of the classic novel "Babbitt" by Sinclair Lewis, left. It begins on KCRW-FM at 8 a.m. Thanksgiving Day and runs in its entirety. A report on the actors, below, and their projects by Dennis McDougal. Page 58.*



MARSHA TRAUBER / Los Angeles Times

### Black Musicians and Black Radio: Blackout? Page 6.

# Why Actresses Are in Love With 'Babbitt'

By DENNIS McDUGAL

**B**imbettes, somebody's love interest, maybe an occasional murderess. . . .

There just aren't that many terrific roles for women.

"Do there have to be good parts for women?" asked Ed Begley Jr. "There's always makeup and props. . . ."

"There's also the possibility that tomorrow morning's newspaper could read, 'Begley Found Dead,'" threatened actress Georgia Brown.

It was one of the regular Thursday night meetings of an 18-month-old all-star radio troupe called Los Angeles Classic Theatre Works. Its members were toasting each other for wrapping up Sinclair Lewis' "Babbitt," which does have a healthy roster of women's roles. Almost half of the 34 members of the troupe are women. "Babbitt" gets its public premiere Thanksgiving Day in a 14½-hour broadcast over KCRW-FM (89.9).

Beginning at 8 a.m., KCRW will air Lewis' entire 319-page portrait of George F. Babbitt. Except for station identifications and a 1½-hour break at 5 p.m. for the National Public Radio newsmagazine "All Things Considered," the Santa Monica City College radio station will do nothing but recount the tale of the conniving 1920s middle-class real estate developer from the fictitious Midwestern town of Zenith.

But when discussion turned to the next two productions the troupe will be dramatizing for the British Broadcasting Corp. in March and April, talk drifted back to the Female Roles Problem.

Brown took another drag off her Marlboro Light and suggested they do "The Crucible." There are several meaty women's roles there.

JoBeth Williams tugged her denim miniskirt down to mid-thigh and suggested a reading of "Lysistrata" or "The Trojan Women." Maybe an all-female Japanese play.

"They have those transvestite productions, you know?" she said.

Ed Asner, who played the title role in "Babbitt," pointed out the obvious about the play that the majority of the troupe most wanted to do as a "Babbitt" encore, "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been." There are no women.

The Eric Bentley play about the House Committee on Un-American Activities' investigation of Hollywood has a single cameo role for playwright Lillian Hellman. All the rest of the roles are for men.

"But it would be perfect for radio," said Michael York.

"It has to be all men?" asked Begley.



Ed Asner, center, plays title role in Los Angeles Classic Theatre Works' "Babbitt." Georgia Brown holds script next to Asner; from left rear, Bud Cort, Holly Palance, Helen Hunt, Ted

Danson, Nan Martin, Hector Elizondo, Richard Masur, Marian Mercer, Harry Hamlin; from left, seated, Robert Foxworth, JoBeth Williams, Fionnula Flanagan, Michael York, Ally Sheedy.

"Can't some of the women be investigators?" asked Ally Sheedy.

No, went the round-table discussion. Not if the integrity of the play is to be preserved.

So what about Shakespeare?

"There is no Shakespeare play with more than six women's roles, except for 'The Merry Wives of Windsor,'" said JoBeth Williams.

And "Macbeth"?

"If we do that, 64,000 women will show up to audition for the role [of Lady Macbeth]," said Georgia Brown.

Laughter.

They'll show up hours early, said Begley.

Laughter.

In Winnebagoes with full entourage, said David Selby.

Laughter.

And agents, negotiating for the role.

More laughter.

"And Asner'll wind up getting the part," said Brown.

"Lady McBabbitt"?? said Selby.

No laughter.

There has always been a tug of war over women's roles and minorities' roles, roles for older actors and roles (other than simplistic ingenue parts) for young actors. The ugly truth in the acting biz is that all the very best roles seem to have been written by white adult males for white adult males.

But the sheer glut of actors trying to break into show biz has always made Hollywood a buyer's

market, so the niceties of too few or too many roles for women or children or senior citizens rarely come up at cattle calls.

Actors don't cooperate. They compete. Even if they have an agent, a personal manager and a Winnebago on the set.

"Pulling people like this together who are really at the top of their profession is really a tricky business," said Los Angeles Classic Theatre Works producer Susan Loewenberg. "There's expectation, anticipation and fear."

Loewenberg said that taping "Babbitt" took 15 months. Some of the actors had projects and were off on location. Individual roles were recorded when a member of the troupe could come in for a session. A computer was used to keep track of the tapes and to help edit it all together.

Normally, democracy among actors in Hollywood is as unlikely as table manners among vampires. That Loewenberg's experiment in radio repertory has survived for 18 months and two major productions, she says with some pride, is nothing less than a minor miracle.

From time to time established film and TV actors who want to be taken "seriously" will form or join a repertory group, but they never seem to last. Most usually fall apart before they have staged a single production—victims of the actors' movie commitments or TV commercials or backstage ego battles. Sometimes the harsh reality of lavish staging costs and too little

money kills a show before it gets to dress rehearsal.

So Los Angeles Classic Theatre Works and KCRW teamed up to try a different, albeit, offbeat, approach. Loewenberg and Judith Auberjonois, who co-founded the Classic Theatre Works as an offshoot of Loewenberg's well-established Los Angeles Theatre Works, didn't try to stage anything in the beginning. They followed the example of Orson Welles and his Mercury Theater troupe.

"Radio is cheap and it allows for the pure essence of acting," Loewenberg said.

Los Angeles Classic Theatre Works isn't ready to film "Citizen Kane" yet, but something like that may come in time. Lewis' classic satire of middle-America, "Babbitt," is not a bad start, according to Loewenberg. In much the same way that the Mercury Theater of the Air launched itself 49 years ago with the radio dramatization of H.G. Wells' "War of the Worlds," the actors' "collective" that Loewenberg and Auberjonois have assembled is starting out slowly and inexpensively on the radio before moving on to more ambitious projects.

There aren't many who believe that the kind of drama that faded from the old Philco generations ago is making a comeback. Naysayers liken the "Babbitt" experiment to Charlie Chaplin's attempt to resurrect the little tramp in a silent

"Modern Times" 15 years after the advent of talkies.

"We know there's an audience for it," said KCRW General Manager Ruth Hirschman, who scrounged up \$25,000 in grants and listener contributions to produce the "Babbitt" marathon.

For several years, her station has broadcast at least two hours of drama and comedy every week day. Two years ago, KCRW devoted all of New Year's Day to a 24-hour broadcast of the Irish National Radio production of James Joyce's "Ulysses"—a broadcast that Hirschman insists was so well-received by the small but ardent lovers of radio drama that it inspired the Los Angeles Classic Theatre Works troupe to find its own classic novel to hone into a radio dramatization.

Led by Asner and Nan Martin as George and Myra Babbitt, this classic reading is the fledgling troupe's second—and easily its most ambitious—production.

According to Loewenberg, it won't be the last. The BBC just committed itself to underwrite at least two more productions next year. For the first time in its neophyte history, the Los Angeles Classic Theatre Works actors will get paid for their work, she said, even though it will only be American Federation of Television and Radio Artists scale.

The two plays, which the troupe is trying to select in its Thursday evening readings, will premiere simultaneously in April in the United Kingdom—where radio is still regarded on a par with television—and over KCRW.

In addition to the radio projects, the troupe hopes to go on stage without a radio backup as early as next June. Loewenberg said she is negotiating for a medium-size venue to stage Bertolt Brecht's "Threepenny Opera."

The Thanksgiving "Babbitt" is

## A Clarification

Calendar has learned that in his interview with Polish playwright Janusz Glowacki (Nov. 8), freelance writer Jacek Kalabinski interspersed actual quotations from Glowacki with previously published material from an essay that Glowacki had written for the New York Times. Attribution should have been made to Glowacki's essay. Glowacki's drama "Hunting Cockroaches" plays through Dec. 13 at the Mark Taper Forum.