The McCarthy Era and the American Theatre

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Eric Bentley's *Thirty Years of Treason*, Lillian Hellman's *Scoundrel Time*, Lately Thomas's *When Even Angels Wept*, and Robert Goldston's *The American Nightmare* are only a few of the many studies that have been written about that unsettling and aberrant period of recent American history frequently known as the McCarthy era.¹ The very titles of the books tell us immediately with what loathing and shame most Americans now look back to that time of political paranoia. Joseph McCarthy, the junior senator from Wisconsin, who became a household word through the famous hearings that sought to excoriate Communists from the American army and from American life, was really only one aspect of a widespread fear of subversion already very much manifest long before Senator McCarthy came forth with his claims. On February 9, 1950, Senator McCarthy made his famous speech to the ladies of the Ohio County Women’s Republican Club in Wheeling, West Virginia, exclaiming, “I have here in my hand a list of 205 who were known to the secretary of state as being members of the Communist Party and who, nevertheless, are still working and shaping policy in the State Department.” With these words he launched his now infamous campaign against Communism, but as one historian nicely points out, the menace had merely found its spokesman.² The real starting point for the so-called McCarthy era actually came several years earlier when, on March 12, 1947, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9835 creating a loyalty and security program within the American federal government.

Executive Order 9835 brought with it the Attorney General’s List, a checklist, for internal use, of organizations with ties to Communist, Fascist and other subversive

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² Goldston, p. 57.
views. Were an applicant connected with any organization on the Attorney General's List, serious scrutinizing of the applicant would be in order before he or she could be placed on the federal payroll. When Truman allowed that list to be published, it became quickly used unscrupulously by an array of blacklisters: "Without charging any illegal acts, without supplying the grounds for its proscription, without offering a machinery for individual reply, the government branded as putatively disloyal any citizen who belonged to one of a large number of organizations. . . . The List, intended to supply prima facie reason for investigating federal employees, was used to deny people employment in any responsible position, private or public."3 The main beneficiary of Executive Order 9835 was the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), a then relatively insignificant committee of the House of Representatives. Young congressmen like Richard Nixon, who had been assigned to the unimportant Un-American Activities Committee saw and seized their opportunity for making it into a powerful political platform. With the "success" of the Alger Hiss case, HUAC was launched as the machinery for expunging the Red menace from American shores. Senator McCarthy was merely one aspect of the nightmare unleashed by President Truman's executive order and an HUAC running wild with its own power, breeding fear and hysteria in the public mind.

The period of American history colored by the Attorney General's List, by the witchhunting of HUAC and by Senator McCarthy's infamous hearings need not be retold here nor is it necessary once again to rehearse the names and testimonies of the Hollywood and Broadway figures summoned before the HUAC and often subsequently censured or destroyed professionally. In his Are You Now or Have You Ever Been and Thirty Years of Treason, Eric Bentley has already done that for us with the eloquence of understatement.4 What has not, however, been given enough attention is the effect of HUAC and Joe McCarthy on American playwriting, particularly on the American drama of the early 1950s.

To some extent, as Barry Witham has argued, American drama during the 1950s averted its face from politics, producing what he calls "wistful melodrama" like Picnic, Tea and Sympathy, and Member of the Wedding. Certainly there is truth in this, although, as I hope to show later, Tea and Sympathy does not belong with Witham's other "wistful and inoffensive" melodramas.5 Witham's description, however, gives only part of the picture. Directly affected as it was by the machinations of HUAC, the American theatre did not sit silently by or just retreat to the

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drama of psychologically troubled individuals. The era of political witch hunts pro-
duced a number of important plays and revivals that brought before the public,
onstage, directly and indirectly the issues that troubled those times.

On November 14, 1950 a light-hearted vehicle for Rex Harrison and Lilli Palmer
opened on Broadway. It was John Van Druten’s Bell, Book and Candle, a piece of
Broadway fluff about an earnest young man who falls in love with or is made to fall
in love with a witch. Certainly John Van Druten’s comedy is not meant in any way
to be a political play, yet even this playful piece about witches is not devoid of hints
about the more serious witch hunts then going on in government and even about the
insinuations of hexing that were to flourish in the years of Joe McCarthy, the years
after Bell, Book and Candle opened. When Gillian, Van Druten’s sexy hex, attempts
to reveal her history as a witch to the young “straight” publisher with whom she has
fallen in love, sensitive issues are comically raised:

Shep: What is it? Something in your past that you didn’t want questions asked about?
What have you been up to? Have you been engaging in un-American activities?
Gillian: No. I’d say very American. Early American!*6

As Gillian tries to delineate the nature of witchcraft, she explains, “But there are
ways of—well—altering things... Manipulating things for yourself... Short cuts
to getting your own way... Shep, the people who live by those short cuts are the
people who—I’ve got to say it—live by magic.”7 Certainly there is much congruence
between the description of black magic in Bell, Book and Candle and the then cur-
rent American vision of the Communist threat.

With the opening on January 13, 1951, less than two months after Bell, Book and
Candle, of the dramatization of Arthur Koestler’s Darkness at Noon, the Com-
munist threat was made grippingly and seriously manifest on the American stage. In
the hands of Sidney Kingsley, a playwright who made his mark during the period of
the Group Theatre of the 1930s, Koestler’s novel about a man who is denounced and
liquidated by the very political cause he helped to found is seriously reduced.
Koestler’s nameless tyranny is given a local habitation and a name. The anonymity
of Koestler’s novel is destroyed, and the cause is clearly labelled as Russian Com-
munism; and Rubashov, Koestler’s hero, is identified as a Trotskyite. The reasons for
resurrecting in dramatic form a novel that had been published in English ten years
earlier and the reason for reducing Koestler’s general allegory to a specific indict-
ment of Communism was all too apparent in January of 1951. John McClain, the
theatre reviewer of the right-wing Journal-American wrote, “one leaves the theatre
with a prayer of thanks for the fact that It Can’t Happen Here and a rededication to
the task of keeping it thus.”8 And Robert Coleman, the reviewer for the Daily Mir-
ror, the Journal’s tabloid counterpart, said of Kingsley, “He has, however, pointed a
moral for today. In a brief episode an official of the Soviet secret police reads part of

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7 Van Druten, pp. 101–102.
a confidential memo to the effect that Communists won Russia in the first war and intend to win the world in the next. Mind you, that was supposed to be before World War II. How prophetic!"9

Kingsley's dramatization of *Darkness at Noon* is a series of flashbacks in the mind of Rubashov, a leader who had helped bring the Russian Revolution about and the Bolsheviks to power. Incarcerated for treason by the very state he helped create, Rubashov reflects upon the promise, failure and dastardly corruption of the Communist dream. Dramatically, *Darkness at Noon* leaves much to be desired, but as a testimony about the ruthlessness, cruelty, and outright Machiavellianism of Russian Communism it is eloquent. When Rubashov's captor argues that the revolution has been functional, Rubashov angrily screams at him:

> Functional? So functional in taking the land, in one year, we let five million farmers and their families die of starvation! Deliberately. So functional in freeing the people from industrial exploitation we sent ten million of them to forced labor under worse conditions than galley slaves. So functional, to settle a difference of opinion, the omnipotent Leader knows only one argument — Death! — whether it's a matter of submarines, manure, or the party-line in Indo-China. Death!10

And the cry of the victimized ordinary citizen is heard through the sentimental character of Luba Loshenko, the humble secretary in love with Rubashov: "What are you doing to us? What are you doing to us? We're not stone, we're not machines! We're human beings. We feel, we think, we see, we dream, we're a part of God. Why have you done this to us? You say God is dead, but you've made your own god out of darkness, out of misery and lies and pain! Why? Why are you doing this to us?"11

Rubashov can only answer meekly, "This was not the way it was to be." One is shocked by the unrelentingly frightening, hellish picture of Communism painted by Kingsley, and one is led to applaud Rubashov's eleventh hour recantation, for *Darkness at Noon* is so strong an attack that it leaves no stone unturned in denouncing Communism. When *Darkness at Noon* opened, Albert Maltz, John Howard Lawson, and others connected with the theatre and motion picture industry of the 1930s had already been singled out for attack by HUAC. One can only speculate now whether Kingsley, who was closely associated with many of them, was not, by dramatizing *Darkness at Noon*, like Rubashov, recanting his leftist connections of an earlier period, and protecting himself thereby from the scrutiny of HUAC.

Another playwright who had flourished during an earlier period took his stand on the subject of Communism that same year. On October 31, 1951, Maxwell Anderson's play about Socrates' last days, *Barefoot in Athens* opened at the Martin Beck Theatre. Anderson saw his mission as one to rescue Socrates from the false picture of that philosopher drawn by his disciple Plato and to present instead a portrait colored by what Anderson had gleaned from reading Xenophon. As Anderson presents him, Socrates is the feisty voice of Athenian democracy who will not compromise

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the freedoms of that democracy to the conquering Spartans and what Anderson sees as their ancient form of Communist totalitarianism. In “Socrates and his Gospel,” the essay that prefaces the published version of Barefoot in Athens, Anderson argues that Plato in The Republic posits little more than a brutal Communist dictatorship:

Liquidation is a modern word in this connection, but it is a fair translation of what Plato proposes to do with recalcitrants. No doubt Plato set out to define a happy society in his republic, but what we find in his pages, if we boil it down, is something very much like Russia under the Politburo. . . . Having written honestly about Socrates in Crito and The Apology, Plato began to fudge and side-step and prevaricate as his own opinions altered. And these new beliefs of his were attributed to Socrates in all the later dialogues except The Laws. In this last dialogue even the name of Socrates was discarded and Plato states his final communist doctrine.12

Plato, Anderson goes on to say, found himself “coming closer to the communism of Sparta . . . and was sufficiently astute to see that the rigid structure of a communist society could be maintained only by a ruthless use of assassination, yet he chucked democracy and came out for communism.”13 In Barefoot in Athens, Socrates is executed by a communist Sparta and dies a martyr to Athenian democracy and the American way of life. At his trial, Socrates points out: “Those who wish me to live believe in the life of thought; those who wish me to die believe that men should do as they are told, without thinking. Those who wish me to live believe that every man should judge his own actions and those of his leaders; those who wish me to die believe that only the leaders should judge.”14 One critic has argued that Maxwell Anderson’s reluctance to criticize democracy as well as communism stemmed from his possible fear of running afoul of Senator McCarthy’s witchhunters.15 Brooks Atkinson’s review of the play in the New York Times guardedly noted that it is a “play about spiritual malaise in America today.”16 It is beautifully ironic, however, that on the front page of the Times in which Brooks Atkinson’s review appeared, the headlines told of a modern intellectual being tried not by Spartan Communists but by the so-called patriots under Senator McCarthy’s leadership. The headline read: “U.S. Indicts [Corliss] Lamont for Balking Inquiry.”

In 1952, two dramatic responses hostile to the HUAC and McCarthy hearings were written and probably never performed. One of these was by one of the first so-called Communists named by HUAC, the 1930s playwright and screenwriter Albert Maltz. In 1952 Maltz tried to strike back at HUAC by writing a hard-hitting, agit-prop play called The Morrison Case based on an official transcript of a hearing held at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. In Maltz’s play, Pete Morrison finds himself blacklisted and out of a job because of his supposed interest in Communist organizations and the reading matter they print. Morrison’s only crime is having a curious mind, but with the abandonment of a fair trial and the right to face one’s accusers, which the

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11 Kingsley, pp. 110-111.
13 Maxwell Anderson, p. xii.
14 Maxwell Anderson, pp. 87-88.
publication of the Attorney General's List permitted, Morrison finds himself out of work at the close of his hearing. With rhetoric reminiscent of Waiting for Lefty, Morrison shouts: "... this whole business is rotten from the beginning, it's rotten fish. It don't make no difference I'm not a Communist. I think your job is to get rid of anybody who thinks different from you do ... I read a newspaper you don't like, I own some books you don't like—that's it! ... I think my job was gone the minute I was charged, before I walked in here." The Morrison Case never got to Broadway. It never got into a theatre. It was never even published. Today Maltz can say wistfully, "It is not new for me to write something that then falls like a pebble into a deep well," but clearly in 1952 so strong a response from a playwright singled out by HUAC had no chance on Broadway or anywhere.

William Saroyan's The Slaughter of the Innocents is the other 1952 play that never made it to Broadway, although it was published that year in the November issue of Theatre Arts. The tone of Saroyan's play is allegorical and it concerns the failure to speak out against the tyranny of a government whose legal system has become no more than a kangaroo court in which the defendant is doomed before the trial begins. The allegory has much in common with The Morrison Case, but it may be compared, as well to Darkness at Noon. The main character sums up the meaning of The Slaughter of the Innocents when he says, "We stood by when grown men and women, no more guilty than any of us, were brought to trial and murdered. Each of us participated in these murders by not protesting by word or act, and so we are all murderers." It is not surprising that Saroyan's play was never performed, for the Slaughter of the Innocents may well be the playwrights outcry against the courtroom tyranny of HUAC and Senator McCarthy, but the play's characters and plot are so obscure as to defeat Saroyan's purpose. That Saroyan's drama was not produced has probably something to do with the controversial subject matter of The Slaughter of the Innocents but has, finally, probably more to do with the fact that it is not one of Saroyan's better plays.

On April 30, 1952 a forceful attack was made upon the tyranny of the McCarthy era when James Thurber and Elliott Nugent revived their successful 1940 hit comedy, The Male Animal. "If The Male Animal was daringly outspoken in 1940, it was doubly so in 1952 when the late Senator McCarthy and his associates were at the height of their power," writes one Thurber scholar. It is impressive that Thurber and Nugent's comedy about academic freedom and anti-Red philistinism on a

17 Albert Maltz, The Morrison Case, unpubl. typescript (1952), p. 43. Mr. Maltz has been kind enough to give me a copy of his typescript.
20 William Saroyan, Slaughter of the Innocents in Theatre Arts 36 (Nov. 1952), 55. In their preface to the play, the editors of Theatre Arts commented, "Its theme is a larger, a more momentous one than Mr. Saroyan has ever undertaken before: no less than that of traditional freedoms of democracy at a time when pressures to jettison those freedoms mount higher everywhere day by day." Theatre Arts 36 (Nov. 1952), 33.
Midwest university campus, which was funny in 1940 was decidedly unfunny in 1952 because it then addressed very real fears in the mind of the American public.\textsuperscript{22}

The revival at the New York City Center with Elliott Nugent playing, as he had in 1940, the leading role was slated for a two-week limited engagement. Very likely the new topicality of \textit{The Male Animal} brought the revival such success that it moved to the Music Box when the limited engagement at the City Center ended and continued to play for a total of 301 performances. Some of the new topicality of Thurber and Nugent's comedy is registered in Richard Watts's review:

Certainly no one can say that its basic theme, which has to do with the right of a college English instructor to read to his students a literary masterpiece written by a notorious radical, has become dated in the interim. That, in at least this respect, the play has grown even more timely than it seemed in 1940 is suggested by the ironic fact that, in the current version, the authors have felt called upon to introduce into their modestly liberal comedy a new speech in which the slightly radical college editor is permitted to deny he is a Communist. As I recall it, nobody suspected him of being one in 1940.\textsuperscript{23}

What is particularly interesting about Watts's comment is that he makes a telling error, for the student editor does in fact deny that he is a Communist in the 1940 playscript. That Watts assumed Thurber and Nugent had added this as a timely revision in 1952, speaks eloquently about the tenor of the times.

There can be little doubt that in the heyday of McCarthyism and the firings of college teachers suspected of being Communists or fellow travellers, the interchange between Tommy Turner, the English instructor, and Ed Keller, a member of the board of trustees at Midwestern University, was a tense moment in the theatre:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Ed}: I'm just telling Turner here we've had enough of this Red business among the students and the faculty. Don't want any more.

\textit{Tommy}: This isn't Red, Mr. Keller.

\textit{Ed}: Maybe not, but it looks bad. We don't want anything Red—or even Pink—taught here.

\textit{Tommy}: But who's to decide what is Red or what is Pink?

\textit{Ed}: We are! Somebody's got to decide what's fit to teach. If we don't who would.

\textit{Damon}: I thought the faculty had—

\textit{Ed}: No sir. You fellows are too wishy-washy. We saw that in the Chapman case. Americanism is what we want taught here.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

If the revival of \textit{The Male Animal} took a potshot at McCarthyism, it was soon followed by a second forceful, though indirect, salvo fired at HUAC by another revival.

On May 21, 1952, Lillian Hellman had been summoned before HUAC to testify about her connections with subversive groups and to name the names of others with Communist Party affiliations. Ms. Hellman refused to do so and submitted an eloquent letter to the Committee in which she stated that "to hurt innocent people

\textsuperscript{22} Morsberger, p. 141.

\textsuperscript{23} New York Post, 1 May 1952, rpt. in New York Theatre Critics Reviews 13 (1952), 297.

whom I knew many years ago in order to save myself is, to me, inhuman and indecent and dishonorable. I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year’s fashions. The members of HUAC would not accept her letter and she was forced to plead the Fifth Amendment for most of the remainder of her hearing. Although Hellman stood up to the Committee and although she was not finally cited for contempt, a stigma for having been subpoenaed nonetheless remained. She cleverly struck back by directing a revival of her 1934 hit play, The Children’s Hour, which opened in New York on December 18, 1952, seven short months after her appearance before HUAC. Who could object on political grounds to a play about two schoolteachers accused of lesbianism, a play that had been a box office success eighteen years earlier, a play that seemed totally devoid of political content?

What of course Hellman realized was that her 1930s play about two women whose careers are ruined by the insinuations of a malicious student had more meaning in 1952 than it had had in 1934, that the situation of her play was in fact an almost perfect metaphor for the insinuations of HUAC and the way in which careers were being ruined by those insinuations. With Hellman’s own recent appearance before HUAC fresh in their minds, the newspaper reviewers quickly saw the play’s new relevance and new punch. The reviewer for the New York World-Telegram & Sun wrote, “The added years have brought much consideration to the uses of slander, which is the subject of this tragedy. We have all learned a lot about condemnation without trial, as well as about accusations to which answers are important.” And similarly, Brooks Atkinson commented, “But we now know that lives can be destroyed by other types of slander. . . . Literally, it is still the story of two hounded teachers, but the implications are much broader now and have new political overtones.” The success of the revival of The Children’s Hour surely stemmed from the fact that it spoke so feelingly about what Lillian Hellman and others had undergone and were undergoing at the hands of the Washington witch hunters.

And witch hunting of course is the subject of Arthur Miller’s The Crucible, the most well-known and best of the American plays that address the McCarthy era. Opening on January 22, 1953, only one month after The Children’s Hour, The Crucible is ostensibly a play about the Salem witch trials. But as Brooks Atkinson commented the next day, “Neither Mr. Miller nor his audience are unaware of certain similarities between the perversions of justice then and today.” And lest the

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26 19 Dec. 1952, rpt. in New York Theatre Critics Reviews 13 (1952), 152. It is interesting, moreover, that the day prior to the opening of The Children’s Hour another play opened concerning an ex-Communist puppeteer run out of a suburban town for his past political affiliations. John D. Hess’s The Grey-Eyed People, which ran for five performances at the Martin Beck Theatre and starred Walter Matthau, was a failure, was panned by the critics who compared it unfavorably with The Male Animal, and was never published. Its presence on Broadway, however, attests to the growing impact, as the reviewers were well aware, of the parlous political and social climate of the early 1950s. See the reviews for The Grey-Eyed People, rpt. in New York Theatre Critics Reviews 13 (1952), 154–156.
passage of time prevent later readers from realizing that the play is about 1953 as well as about 1692. Miller prefaxes the action of his tragedy with a statement that makes his intention pellucid. Writing of the Salem witch hunters, he says:

The times, to their eyes, must have seemed as insoluble and complicated as do ours today. It is not hard for us to see how easily many could have been led to believe that the time of confusion had been brought upon them by deep and darkling forces. No hint of such speculation appears on the court record, but social disorder in any age breeds such mystical suspicions, and when as in Salem, wonders are brought forth from below the social surface, it is too much to expect people to hold back very long from laying on the victims with all the force of their frustrations.  

Thus, when in *The Crucible*, Walter Hampden in the role of the Deputy Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony stands up at the trial of John Proctor and intones, “But you must understand, sir, that a person is either with this court or he must be counted against it, there be no road between. This is a sharp time, now, a precise time—we live no longer in the dusky afternoon when evil mixed with good and befuddled the world,” the “sharp time” he speaks of is also the scoundrel time of the 1950s. What Arthur Miller could not have known as he wrote of John Proctor’s witch trial is that he was forecasting his own appearance before HUAC three years later (June 21, 1956) and his subsequent indictment for contempt of Congress.

Another play of the 1952–53 season bears a distinct family resemblance to both *The Children’s Hour* and *The Crucible*. Robert Anderson’s *Tea and Sympathy*, which opened on September 30, 1953, is certainly more than the melodrama of a prep school boy accused of homosexuality. As Thomas Adler noted in his study of Anderson, *Tea and Sympathy*, though far more muted than *The Crucible*, is, like Miller’s play, a response “to the prevailing atmosphere of the witchhunt unleashed by the McCarthy hearings.” Like the insinuations about the lesbianism of the teachers in Lillian Hellman’s drama, the insinuations about the homosexuality of the sensitive young student in *Tea and Sympathy* had obvious topical meaning for audiences living during the fever pitch years of supposed Communist subversives. When Laura, the young faculty wife, defends the accused Tom Lee against the assumptions and charges of the supposedly manly men like her husband, her speech is clearly about more than just homosexuality:

The facts! What facts! An innocent boy goes swimming with an instructor . . . an instructor whom he likes because this instructor is one of the few who encourage him, who don’t ride him. . . . And because he’s an off-horse, you and the rest of them are only too glad to put two and two together and get a false answer . . . anything which will let you go on and persecute a boy whom you basically don’t like. . . . I resent this judgment by prejudice. He’s not like me, therefore, he is capable of all possible crimes. He’s not one of us . . . a member of the tribe.

And in light of the many academics who lost their jobs through the tyranny of the Attorney General’s List, *Tea and Sympathy* (like *The Male Animal*), aptly goes on

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30 Miller, p. 90.
to show Tom Lee's instructor losing his position without so much as a hearing or a chance to face his accusers.

Because they were so much the target of investigation and charges of Communist affiliation, the playwrights active in the 1930s—like Hellman, Kingsley, Maxwell Anderson, and Saroyan—made their feelings toward witch hunting known in the plays they wrote and produced during the 1950s. Another 30s playwright, Robert Ardrey, who had been active in the Group Theatre and had written minor classics like *Casey Jones* and *Thunder Rock*, resurfaced in the 1950s to produce a fine if spotty drama about life during the McCarthy era. On October 14, 1954, Ardrey's *Sing Me No Lullaby* opened the second season of the Phoenix Theatre. In *Sing Me No Lullaby*, as Richard Watts put it, Ardrey "is striving with most obvious sincerity to probe the unhealthy and hysterical political climate of America in the wake of the cold war."33 The play portrays the reunion, in the heart of the Illinois Lincoln country, of a group of friends who had attended the University of Illinois together in the late 1930s. The setting and the frequent reference to Lincoln allow Ardrey to contrast the principles of freedom and democracy for which Abraham Lincoln stood and the abrogation of that form of democracy through the political tyranny of the 1950s.

Among the group of friends in *Sing Me No Lullaby* is a brilliant mathematician, Mike Hertzog, who seems to have been part of something akin to the Manhattan Project during the war. He went on to teach at Berkeley, and recently has not been much heard from. At first his friends ask him kiddingly if he is in some kind of trouble because "these days—a man can get it for having nursed at the left spigot."34 The joke soon turns very sour indeed when it is discovered that Mike has been investigated and that thereby his career and life have been ruined. At one point in the play, an FBI agent comes, during Mike's absence, to glean evidence from his college friends. One of the stunned friends exclaims, "It's become morally permissible . . . for an American government to go to a citizen, demand that he help get evidence against a very old friend, rough him up a little in case he has qualms of conscience—all to the end that an innocent man may . . . make a few innocent remarks, and get hanged for them."35 As it is retold in the course of the play, Mike's fall from academic grace seems almost melodramatic: "There were new security orders. He says the government was justified. They had to be careful. He thinks he'd have been cleared. That the things they had against him—the organizations, back in college, and the magazine subscriptions, and so on—they weren't too bad. . . . They wanted him to confess that the views he'd held, back before the war, were wrong at the time. And he wouldn't."36

Mike loses his teaching position, his home, job after job, and apartment after apartment so that the play finds him on the brink of defection. The story of Mike

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35 Ardrey, p. 43.
36 Ardrey, p. 57.
Hertzog and indeed of *Sing Me No Lullaby* could be written off as mere melodrama were it not so true a depiction of the lives and fates of many intellectuals and academics during the unchecked reign of the Attorney General's List and the fanatical desire to expunge supposed Communists and fellow travelers from the academies. Despite obvious weaknesses in plot construction, *Sing Me No Lullaby* remains a powerful play that deserves to be rescued from obscurity.

*Sing Me No Lullaby* closed soon after its opening; but six months later, on April 21, 1955, one of Broadway's most successful plays of the decade opened to near rave notices. Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee's *Inherit the Wind* played to packed houses. With the names of the personages slightly changed, *Inherit the Wind* dramatizes the renowned Scopes Monkey Trial. In the Lawrence and Lee play, the original prosecuting attorney, William Jennings Bryan, renamed Matthew Harrison Brady, was played by Ed Begley. The defense attorney, Clarence Darrow, renamed Henry Drummond, became one of the great roles of Paul Muni's acting career. *Inherit the Wind* is, of course, not directly about McCarthyism or the 1950s, but at the same time the impact of the play, its power, and its defense of the freedom of thought cannot be separated from the issues that divided the nation during the first years of the 50s.

The contemporary significance of *Inherit the Wind* in 1955 is stated by Lawrence and Lee in the terse preface to the play. Acknowledging the Scopes trial as their inspiration, they argue that theirs is not a chronicle play. "It is not 1925," they write, and the stage directions set the time as "Not too long ago. It might have been yesterday. It could be tomorrow." The implication, clearly, is that it is today. During the course of the play, its contemporary relevance becomes increasingly clear. In the play's trial scene, after Brady, the William Jennings Bryan character, has examined a young student of Bertram Cates, the Scopes character, Brady declares with impressive courtroom rhetorical pyrotechnics:

> I say that these Bible-haters, these "Evil-utionists," are brewers of poison. And the legislature of this sovereign state has had the wisdom to demand that the peddlers of poison—in bottles or in books—clearly label the products they attempt to sell! I tell you, if this law is not upheld, this boy will become one of a generation, shorn of its faith by the teachings of Godless science! But if the full penalty of the law is meted out to Bertram Cates, the faithful the whole world over, who are watching us here, and listening to our every word, will call this courtroom blessed.

One need only substitute Communism for Evolutionism and Senator McCarthy could not have put it better himself. For the audience of *Inherit the Wind*, the subject matter was novel but the rhetoric and the philosophical issue all too familiar.

*Inherit the Wind* is a significant play within the context of the McCarthy era, for it marks an important departure from all the previous plays discussed. Although Bertram Cates is the evolutionist warlock that a small Tennessee town attempts to exorcize, the play does not focus on the victimization of Cates. Its gaze is, rather, on the

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38 Lawrence and Lee, p. 63.
hollowness and demagoguery of Brady. The play is Drummond's, or Paul Muni's play as he makes increasingly evident the emptiness of Brady's rhetoric, transforming that rhetoric in the public eye to mere linguistic flatulence. By the end of *Inherit the Wind*, Brady is broken and then dies. The play thus neatly caught the tenor of the times outside the theatre. By the time *Inherit the Wind* opened, Joe McCarthy was a broken man. The tide had turned against him, as it does against Brady, and on December 2, 1954, less than five months before *Inherit the Wind* opened, the senator from Wisconsin was officially censured by the U.S. Senate. That was the death knell of his career and of the era to which he gave his name. Brady's death at the close of *Inherit the Wind* was prophetic, for exactly two and a half years after McCarthy's censure, McCarthy himself and, to a large extent, McCarthyism were laid to rest.

With McCarthy's censure, the Cold War paranoia was not dead, for HUAC could still try Arthur Miller in 1956. The Communist threat is likewise present in Henry Denker and Ralph Berkey's *Time Limit!*, which opened on January 24, 1956 and featured Arthur Kennedy and Richard Kiley in the main roles. Kennedy had portrayed John Proctor in *The Crucible* and Kiley had played the lead in *Sing Me No Lullaby*. *Time Limit!* is about Communism and treason, but Denker and Berkey interestingly manipulate their drama so that what begins as a court martial play centering on individual subversion and treason ends as an exposé of insidious, irresistible Communist brainwashing techniques. As the main character says, "This is a new kind of enemy, sir. The code isn't equipped to deal with them." In short, the period from 1947, when HUAC assumed its power, to the demise of Senator McCarthy in 1954 marked the height of a relatively short but black period in American history. The vibrations from Washington were clearly felt everywhere in America including the American theatre and the plays it presented. And the ripple effects of those strong vibrations were felt for many years thereafter.

One would like to say that in the face of HUAC and McCarthy witch hunting American playwrights took a brave and united stand. That is not the case, but it is also not true that they yielded in a cowardly way to stage the paranoid scenarios being written in Washington. The truth of the matter is that, as it always does, the theatre reflected the divisions within society. Playwrights like Maxwell Anderson, Sidney Kingsley, Henry Denker, and Ralph Berkey clearly saw Communism and Communists as a threat to the United States and to American democracy. Others like Arthur Miller, Robert Ardrey, Lillian Hellman, James Thurber, and William Saroyan felt just as strongly that the fanatical attempt to expose Communists, former Communists and fellow travelers was more injurious to the American way of life than Communism itself. That the American stage should have been as divided on the issues as the American people themselves should come as no surprise, for, as Shakespeare long ago knew, the drama and the actors "are the abstract and brief chronicles of the time."

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