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The Artists' Struggle (and Triumph) in the Age of McCarthyism

Post World War II America should have, in theory, become a bastion for the artistic community. A multitude of citizens previously enlisted or working towards the war effort were now free to pursue other areas of activity. An influx of new populations and ideas, including those from the artistically influential Jewish community could have feasibly taken hold. Additionally, with the atrocities of war on both sides being so fresh in the minds of the world, there was hardly a shortage of source material for new works, and a greater need than ever for the themes of anti-war and universality to be expressed. Moreover, the United States held more power and wealth than ever, and thus more funds to contribute to the artists exploring these important topics with a population that could now afford to focus on them. For a brief time, it seemed as if the artistic aspirations for postwar America would come to fruition. A multitude of brilliant artistic minds were in their prime, including playwrights Arthur Miller and Lillian Hellman, who were achieving widespread attention and success through works capitalizing on the political and social issues of the time. Actors, who now had a plethora of good work to be involved in, also seemed to see their profession reach newfound heights.

This ideal was short-lived in its plausibility, however. The United States, despite its accumulation of wealth and power, still managed to find a source of conflict in the flourishing Soviet Union. Ideological opposition to Communism, and its emergence as a

growing systematic rival to America's free-market republic caused hysteria and backlash towards the far left inside the United States, helmed by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House on Un-American Activities Committee. Inevitably, artists were among the principal groups who were to come under suspicion. Miller, Hellman, and many other playwrights, directors, and actors would be forced to testify before the HUAC, and the punishment for lack of compliance and refusal to name other communist sympathizers was grievous. Starting with The Hollywood Ten in film, those who were blacklisted lost their careers, and to a greater extent their lives as they once knew them. Many were completely devastated, never able to recover artistically or financially. Some persevered, finding ways to stand up to the oppressive political climate of the time through their art despite the consequences. By tracing the bitter struggles and ultimate successes of three of these artists—Lillian Hellman, Arthur Miller, and actor Will Geer—the value of artistic creation during the worst of times, be they political or personal in nature, becomes clear.

Lillian Hellman, from the time she bursted onto the scene in the 1930's, was essentially a poster child for counterculture. She reveled in the lifestyle of the New York artist, and empowered the community around her to unionize and speak out against Naziism and the political right (PBS). Much of this fervor was also present in her plays. Though *The Children's Hour*, her first major work, predated McCarthyism by over a decade, the theme was still highly political in nature. Essentially, a lie from a student about two teachers being engaged in a lesbian relationship destroys their lives (literally, one of the teachers commits suicide). Danger of paranoia and lies, and how they could spread like an epidemic of the mind were clearly issues Hellman recognized as

prevalent, even before they reached a boiling point in the 1950's. Equally of political import was *The Little Foxes* and its depiction of the dangers of capitalism. The society which creates such monsters as Oscar and Regina are is one where profit, no matter the cost, is the ultimate goal. People, like Oscar's wife Birdie, are simply trophies to be obtained alongside wealth. Aside from Horace and Alexandra, love and compassion are the furthest things from the ruthless family's minds. Regina, with insatiable avarice and a thirst for power, is as much a victim of the environment she grew up in as she is a practicing tyrant of its worst qualities. Hellman followed these plays with two even more politically zealous pieces—*Watch on the Rhine* and *The Searching Wind*—which directly attacked fascism and America for its lack of early initiative in defending the Jewish people from Hitler and Mussolini (PBS). Forward-thinking practices in her daily life and scathingly critical themes of Anti-capitalism and anti-propaganda in her plays made Hellman become a logical primary target for the Committee.

In 1952, the HUAC made their move on Hellman, attempting to back her into a position where she would be forced to either incriminate her self and be blacklisted or rat out other members of the artistic community. In one of the defining moments of the era, Hellman chose the former. She told Congress by letter that she had “nothing in my life of which I am ashamed” and was “ready and willing to testify as to my own opinions and actions.” (Hellman 1). However, when it came to having to incriminate others, Hellman held steadfastly to her principals. “I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions,” she declared. As the HUAC refused to let her talk without naming others, Hellman took the Fifth Amendment and was blacklisted. The move was met with much support from the press and her peers, though it definitely negatively impacted her

career as a playwright, which would never recover fully. Hellman's best known and most memorable works of theatre were those she wrote before the hearing. This was not enough to deter Hellman from speaking out against McCarthyism, though. She shifted her focus in the 60's and 70's to writing memoirs of her career thus far, touching upon both personal and political points for emphasis. Alongside this endeavor came a love for teaching and student activism, which she remained heavily involved in for the remainder of her life (PBS). Despite being blacklisted, Hellman found a way to fight through the injustices of her career and still had a huge impact on thousands of lives.

The other American playwright lauded for his fight against McCarthyism, perhaps to an even greater extent than Hellman, is Arthur Miller. Unlike Hellman, who enjoyed large success before WWII, Miller's career flourished following the conflict. His first Broadway hit was *All My Sons* in 1945, a play which centers around postwar issues. It concerns the repercussions of a father selling faulty airplane parts during the war out of economic necessity, and the son he lost in a plane crash that could conceivably be his fault. Issues of morality even in dire situations centered around a postwar plot captivated and intellectually stimulated audiences nationwide. His next success, *Death of a Salesman*, also touches upon a key American issue: the follies and dangers of the American Dream, and the consequences across a family when it is unable to be fulfilled. These plays challenged the traditional American way of thinking, contesting the goals of the American citizen and how these goals were attempted. Surprisingly, Miller was for a time able to avoid speculation by the HUAC despite his political style for writing, and was not among the first group of artists to be tried or blacklisted. This gave him the perfect opportunity to observe the conditions and dealings of his peers, and the freedom

to work on a piece encompassing the turmoil of the McCarthy era. Cited as saying “the playwright is one of the audience who happens to know how to speak” (Galvin 1), Miller devised a near-perfect solution to comment upon what he saw. *The Crucible* was written and performed on Broadway with tumultuous impact in 1953. Much in the style of Bulgakov’s *Moliere*, Miller used a political allegory of the past to comment on the conditions of the present. The story of the Salem Witch Trials is historically one of America’s most notorious moments of extremism, a fact which Miller was very aware of in his creation of this play. Finding the real names of the key figures in the Trials, Miller proceeded to spin a tale of historical fiction around them. Convictions with unholy intentions behind them derive from teenager Abigail Williams, who revels in both the power and attention her fallacious pleas are receiving. Her true motive is to gain hold of John Proctor, an older man she engaged in an affair with while his wife was ill. She uses the trials to cause hysteria, enacting vengeance on those in her way and pressuring the other girls to do the same. Wealthy landowners and power-hungry judges join in the litany of accusations, and innocent townswomen lose their lives at the hands of their accusers’ machinations. The potency of the spread of the witch hysteria, and the avarice of those who formulate it directly coincide with the actions of McCarthy and the HUAC. Audiences were perceptive enough to pick up on this fact, including McCarthy himself (Lavanture 1). Miller wrote the play anyway, regardless of the consequences, and saw it become popular worldwide. Essentially taking a major shot at McCarthyism and its proponents, it was no surprise that Miller would soon after find himself at the forefront of the battleground: seated in front of the HUAC for questioning.

Whereas Hellman and many of the other blacklisted artists before him had refused to testify and cited the Fifth Amendment, Arthur Miller took a different approach. The HUAC, yearning for an excuse to call Miller in, finally got one when the playwright attempted to renew his passport to travel to England with his fiancé, Marilyn Monroe, to get a production of *A View From the Bridge* started in London, and was denied (U.S. Congress 4685). In June of 1956, he went in for his testimony, opting to speak despite being given an earlier option not to (he later said he was even offered a deal of no testimony if one member of the committee could hug Marilyn Monroe). He was told beforehand that his refusal to name others would not be pushed any further during the hearing (BBC 1). Of course, this was quite far from the truth, as the Committee proceeded to interrogate Miller on a multitude of his peers, including Elia Kazan, Sue Warren, and Arnaud D'Usseau. Miller denied to comment on any of them, using an array of tactics to avoid doing so, such as avoiding the question, sudden memory loss, or flat out telling Congress they had mislabeled their evidence. Additionally, the committee interrogated him on a series of his past contributions to organizations with communist members, his endorsement by Socialist newspapers, and the political nature of his plays: especially *The Crucible* (US Congress). The cunning and smarminess with which Miller answered (or did not answer) the questions forced upon him served to not only evade the HUAC's accusations but embarrass them in the process. Cutting off numerous members of the committee to correct them or exclaim "let me finish my point" are of particular note. Beyond this, Miller defended the legality and worth of the arguments and statements he and other artists were making at the time, citing freedom of speech as an advocate for their works. His valiance was met with a temporary

blacklisting in the U.S., and an additional conviction for contempt of congress (Galvin 1). Though eventually cleared of this charge in 1958, Miller hit a low point in both his career and personal life following the hearing (PBS 1). He and Monroe divorced in 1961, and his next acclaimed plays did not emerge until *The Last Yankee* in the early 1990's. Despite all of this, Arthur Miller had done more than enough to leave his mark on America's political conscious. *The Crucible*, along with his other classics, are frequently taught and cited as the epitome of American literature with major sociopolitical impact.

While famous playwrights, directors, and producers garnered much of the attention during McCarthy era, especially from the public perspective, they were by no means the only ones affected. In total, at least three-hundred and twenty artists were blacklisted, grinding the dreams and livelihoods of many to a career-ending halt. (PBS 2). Actor testimonies, especially firsthand accounts of the detriment of being blacklisted, are exceedingly rare. One which survives, and is becoming better known each year in Southern California is that of actor Will Geer. Most of the documents and journals written by Geer on his days as a blacklisted artist remain with his family, but once a year a portion of them are read, alongside anecdotes from Geer's daughter Ellen, in Topanga, California. What is public domain is that before 1951, Geer's career was moving forward considerably. After making his Broadway debut in *Tobacco Road* in 1933, Geer was cast by John Steinbeck as "Slim" in the Broadway adaptation of *Of Mice and Men*. High billing in films such as *Anna Locasta*, *Comanche Territory*, and *Winchester '73* followed in the late 1940's and through 1950 (Stephan 1). Geer, however, from his younger days, was a liberal and a political activist. In his own words, he was "a lifelong agitator, a radical. A rebel is just against things for rebellion's sake. By

radical, I mean someone who goes to the roots.” (Stephan 1). As a member of the Communist party, and a touring musician with Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, Geer proved he was just that. His tendency to be at the epicenter of political uprising made him an even higher priority adversary in the HUAC’s mind than Hellman or Miller. Of the three, he was the first to be blacklisted in 1951.

Will Geer, out of the same respect and courage of his aforementioned peers, declined to name names, using the Fifth Amendment approach Hellman would later implement. As less of a celebrity than the playwrights, though, Geer’s situation was much more dire than theirs following his condemnation. He lost his Southern California home, and was forced for months to live as a gypsy, wandering from place to place with his family. Initially, he struggled to pick up the pieces of his deteriorating career. Poverty forced his daughters to steal food from convenience stores during the worst of times (Geer). Eventually, with the aid of his wife and friend Herta Ware, Geer was able to bounce back from his lost career and fortune, just as Miller and Hellman were. Together, he and Herta bought a plot of land in Topanga, California which began as a therapeutic sanctum for the Geer family to rebuild and Will to practice horticulture, which he had a Master’s degree in. His love of the stage was too great to confine the place to being a giant garden, though, and in time the space became a bastion for blacklisted actors and musicians known as Theatricum Botanicum. The company remains extremely active today, and has emerged as one of the nation’s leading Shakespearean/Classical repertory companies. Its roots and practices are still very much founded on Will Geer’s activism and ideology, with events held each year to commemorate the struggle of artists during the era of McCarthyism. Geer himself even managed to reestablish his

career with aplomb after the paranoia subsided, landing his most famous role in the TV classic *The Walton's*. His work both on set and on the stage of his theatre stand as testaments, just like the works of Miller and Hellman, to the perseverance of the artists of this era despite their persecution.

Over sixty years have passed since Joseph McCarthy and the HUAC loomed ominously over the artistic community. Though the road has been far from a smooth one, plays, movies, and all of those involved in their creation have continued to comment on the world around them, serving a vital function time and time again. There is no guarantee, though, that the work done in the performing arts will not be lobbied against by the government once more. The lack of funding for artists in this country in general is evidence to that, and the artistic community remains one of the most vehement bodies in America for political activism. In the times which challenge the United States the most on a sociopolitical level, the arts will again have the option to take a stand, and in all likelihood find themselves on the precipice of persecution once more. What then, should the community do to respond? If the past actions of Lillian Hellman, Arthur Miller, and Will Geer are paragons to abide by, the answer to that question is crystal clear. As Arthur Miller so eloquently put it in his testimony, "I reflect what my heart tells me from the society around me...I am devoted to what is happening now."

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