

# Seeing red in black and white



"Are you now or have you ever been . . . ?"

By PAULETTE PEIROL

A prime case of American xenophobia: the fear of Communist infiltration in the 1940s. On one side was the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), ardently supported by Nixon, McCarthy, Reagan, and chaired by J. Parnell Thomas. HUAC perpetuated the red scare by using Hoover's label of Communism as "a disease which must be quarantined."

The governmental eye focused especially on Hollywood; now that film could speak, it could also propagandize. Yet there were other reasons. By calling famous witnesses to the stand, such as Walt Disney and Gary Cooper, HUAC was ensured media attention. In the case between HUAC and The Hollywood Ten, "attention" took the form of a full-blown scandal.

The Hollywood Ten were 10 screenwriters plus Bertolt Brecht who stood in "unfriendly" and witty opposition to HUAC. To HUAC's question "Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?", the writers replied ambiguously, citing the First Amendment (of freedom of speech and belief) to declare that the committee's very existence was unconstitutional. Brecht fled America the day after the trial, and the remaining "Ten" were arrested for contempt of court. Each were jailed for a year and blacklisted for over a decade.

The controversial tale of The Hollywood Ten is documented in *Hollywood on Trial* (1976), directed by David Halpern Jr. The film heralded the start of the "Blacklisted" festival, being shown at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) until Sunday, October 27. Blacklisted is sponsored by the AGO and the Toronto Arts Group for Human Rights (TAGHR), originators of last year's successful Forbidden Films Festival. It is curated by Marc Glassman, a director of TAGHR and owner of Pages bookstore in Toronto.

Author Ring Lardner Jr., most noted for his Oscar-winning *Woman of the Year* (being shown at the AGO October 25, 7:00 p.m.) and *M\*A\*S\*H*, was on hand to open the festival last Friday. He was accompanied by his wife, actress Francis Chaney, also a victim of the blacklist. Lardner and Canadian-born Edward Dmytryk are the only two surviving members of the Hollywood Ten. Although he was blacklisted for 17 years, Lardner continued to publish work by using a "front," another author's name as a pseudonym.

Seventy-year-old Lardner is as witty as he was the day he testified before HUAC: "I could answer the question exactly the way you want, Mr. Chairman, but if I did, I'd hate myself in the morning." To this day, Lardner does not regret his actions, saying, "It was a sporting proposition . . . you don't feel bitter."

Chaney however feels that the blacklisting left a thick emotional residue. She says that "it turned you into yourself rather than going outward to express yourself. It made you feel like a pariah." When asked if the blacklisting brought the couple closer together, Lardner responded, "Well, we did spend a lot of time at home . . ."

*Hollywood on Trial*, using archival footage from 1920 to 1950 and later interviews with Lardner, Dalton Trumbo, Dmytryk, and Reagan, is edited with a slightly different viewpoint in mind. The film traces the violet union and labor disputes of the 1920s and '30s as the source of American Communist paranoia. It portrays the HUAC trials as a game of sublimation serving no other pur-



A FUNERAL? Gosh, no! These men mean business. Members of HUAC say 'cheese' with patriotic fervor.



IT'S MY HEARTBURN, MR. CHAIRMAN: John Garfield testifies to the unsympathetic Un-American Activities Committee.

pose than bolstering the careers of aspiring politicians (namely Nixon and Reagan).

Indeed, the footage reveals that the trials were absurdly farcical and, to say the least, undemocratic. Witnesses were caught in a Catch-22; they either had to admit to Communist sentiments, or 'name names' of suspect fellow artists. The latter choice resulted in social stigmatizing of the artist as an informer, and threatened his career—even an informer could be blacklisted. "Everyone was a victim," says Lardner.

*Hollywood on Trial* does not make HUAC's victimization clear enough. By focusing only on artists who survived and surmounted the blacklist, the film neglects the uncouneted others whose careers were virtually nullified. Phillip Loeb is a prime example. Known for his portrayal of "Papa" on *The Goldbergs*, Loeb was blacklisted and in 1951, killed himself.

The points that *Hollywood on Trial* does make, however, both visually and verbally, are salient and arresting. Excerpts from anti-Communist Hollywood films portray Communism as a dangerous cult to beware of. A member of the Hollywood Ten describes the difficulty of obtaining jobs after HUAC's trials: the film cuts to Reagan presiding over a large governmental desk. Furthermore, Reagan is recorded saying that a formal blacklist never existed since "it would be unconstitutional."

*Hollywood on Trial* is at least

thought-provoking, and serves as a worthy testament to the Hollywood Ten. After last Friday's screening, Chaney said that watching the film again "was not enjoyable" but served as a potent reminder of the struggles she and fellow artists endured.

In retrospect, Lardner claims that "it was probably a mistake" to answer HUAC's question so ambiguously. He says that the Ten should have refused to address the issue. However, "we thought the odds were that we'd win the case," he says. Lardner notes that the group was aware of the risks, but optimistic that the Supreme Court would overrule the committee. Chaney adds, "It was almost impossible to avoid political activities in the late '30s."

The Blacklisted festival concentrates on Hollywood films from the McCarthy era and features blacklisted members in each film. It is organized in a thematic progression from films dealing directly with the issue of blacklisting (*Hollywood on Trial* and *The Front*), to film noir which serves to summarize the period.

This Friday the AGO will screen Lardner's *Woman of the Year* which won him an academy award in 1942, and Max Opuls' *Letter from an Unknown Woman*. Both fall into the category of film noir.

The topic of American blacks and Mexicans, which Marc Glassman says was "virtually untouched" by Hollywood before the 1940s will be

"Some people say to me Communists are just a bunch of rats. So why don't we just go out and shoot them? Well, I agree, Communists are just a bunch of rats, but I say this: when you shoot rats you have to shoot straight."

Richard M. Nixon

explored on Saturday. The five screenings include *The Emperor Jones*, based on the play by Eugene O'Neill, and *Salt of the Earth*, followed by *A Crime to Fit the Punishment*, a documentary about the above film.

Sunday, October 17 is "summary day" for the Blacklisted festival. *The Boy with the Green Hair* was hailed as a "red film" in 1948, and concerns racism and passivity. Brecht's *Kuhle Wampe (Wither Germany?)* concludes the festival. It was banned by the Nazis and serves as Brecht's "final testimony" to HUAC.

Lardner says the main function of the Blacklisted festival is "to make people think about what could happen and also to recall the history we're in."

Although not part of AGO's Blacklisted Festival, *Seeing Red* opens simultaneously in Toronto, offering an historical perspective to the American Communist Party.

By STEPHEN MILTON

Farley Mowat is a damned commie. Threat to the nation. Threat to Mom. Or so said the State Department when he tried to go south to promote a book a few months ago. But what the devil is a commie if Mowat qualifies? For the answer to this question, one might drop by the Bloor Cinema during the November 1-7 screenings of *Seeing Red*, a new documentary on the history of the American Communist Party.

*Seeing Red* is a refreshingly candid and timely treatment of the experience of American Communists in the period preceding the 1960s. At a time when the world's most influential senior citizen has condemned the Soviet Union as an "Evil Empire," and has labeled traditional democratic-welfare policies as fundamentally un-American, interviews with patriotic left-wing Americans are a welcome antidote to the current form of civilization.

The film uses period footage of the American Communist Party and its detractors, and has interviews from the 1930s and '40s with five veterans of the Party. It traces the development of the Party from its origins in the depression years, through to its hardest years during the '40s and '50s.

The film's merit derives from its ability to present the motivations of Americans from all walks of life who actually joined the Party. Almost without exception, the members of the Party decided to get involved in it as a means towards realizing the democratic goals which they associated with American liberalism. At times, their descriptions of the Party ideals seem to draw more from Jefferson than Lenin or Marx. In most cases, the impetus to join the Party came from the glaring inequality which surfaced during the depression.

Professor Howard Clifford Johnson explains that it was his experience of dancing for wealthy white patrons at the Cotton Club which convinced him of the need for radical change. Similarly, Bill Bailey, a longshoreman, described his first view of the CP as being the only organization which would lead people on welfare to government offices to demand greater benefits.

*Seeing Red* provides a vivid recollection of the counter-culture which flourished during the 1930s among the Communists in the wake of the success of the Russian Revolution. The upheaval of 1917 served as an inspiration to an entire generation of progressive thinkers, a fact which has become barely imaginable in the aftermath of Stalinism. During the 1930s and '40s, however, the CP looked to the Russian example as proof that there was an alternative to capitalism which could eradicate the contemporary inequalities of the United States. The stigma attached to membership in the Party caused its supporters to remain secretive and create a political culture unto themselves.

Despite the high-profile witch hunts of the McCarthy era, it was not until the mid-1950s that the American Communist Party actually dissolved. The House of Un-American Activities Committee's effort to convict all those associated with the Party was surprisingly unsuccessful in that the FBI failed to provide any

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