

February 4 - March 4, 1995

Seattle Repertory **THEATRE**

JOLSON SINGS AGAIN*

A WORLD PREMIERE by ARTHUR LAURENTS

why is this man stressed out?
Read more to find out!

Student matinee programs are generously funded by the Cultural Enrichment Program at Washington State Arts Commission

Characters:

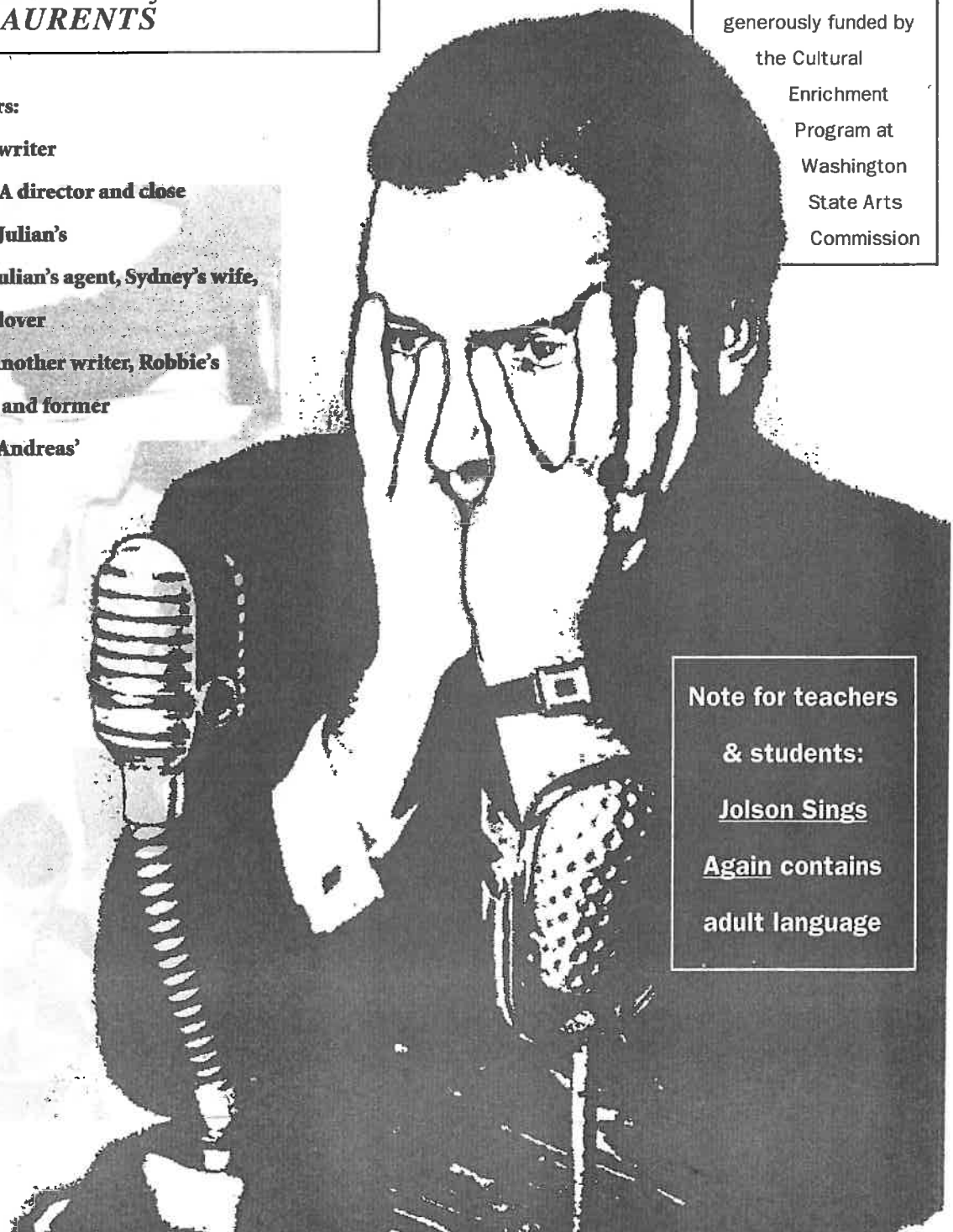
Julian: A writer

Andreas: A director and close friend of Julian's

Robbie: Julian's agent, Sydney's wife, Andreas' lover

Sydney: Another writer, Robbie's husband, and former friend of Andreas'

* Jolson Sings Again takes its name from a newspaper headline in 1951 when actor Larry Parks, who had played Al Jolson in a film about the life of the jazz singer, testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee.



Note for teachers & students:
Jolson Sings Again contains adult language

SYNOPSIS:

Though the play is framed by two short scenes that take place in 1962, its main action takes place between 1947 and 1952, the height of House Un-American Activities Committee's investigations into supposed Communist infiltration of the Hollywood studios. The action of the play is a series of personal and professional negotiations among four friends, Julian, Andreas, Robbie and Sydney, three of whom are former members of the Communist Party. As the hearings drag on and the prospect of being blacklisted becomes more and more of a threat to their professional lives, each is forced to make difficult choices between career, moral principles and friendships.

Andreas is the first to become an informer. He testifies privately before a closed "executive" session of the Committee. When word gets out about his actions, Julian and Robbie confront him. Andreas justifies testifying before the Committee by saying that he only named names he was certain had come up at least five times before.

When Julian questions the morality of cooperating with the Committee, Andreas asks Julian what he'd do if he were to be exposed as a homosexual. Julian then reveals that he was never actually in the Communist party. He has led people to believe he is a former Communist because the party does not admit homosexual members. Therefore, being thought a former member of the Party has allowed Julian to pass as heterosexual.

Having thus forced Julian to admit his compromised principles, Andreas asks Julian if they are still friends. When Julian says he doesn't think so, Andreas points out that he is scheduled to direct Julian's newest play soon; if Julian will not accept an informer as a friend, is it morally right to hire an informer to direct his plays? Julian sees the contradiction and fires Andreas on the spot.

A few months later, Robbie receives a

subpoena. By this time, her husband Sydney has already been called to testify and, refusing to inform, is blacklisted. What was a relatively simple choice for Sydney is more complicated for Robbie; her income is now all that she, Sydney and their son have to live on.

Meanwhile, Julian has written a new play, "Betrayal," about a married man who is secretly homosexual, and Andreas wants to read the script. Robbie, Julian's agent, refuses at first. But Andreas subtly persuades Robbie to turn informer and save her job for the sake of her family. Having compromised her principles in this

though he disagrees with her choice to inform, he understands her motives; he will still be her friend.

Hearing that Julian and Robbie have not broken with each other over her decision to inform, and interpreting this as a change of heart on Julian's part, Andreas comes to visit. He has missed Julian and he wants to direct "Betrayal" with an eye towards eventually turning it into a film. As a way of softening his former friend's resistance, Andreas casually lets it slip that Robbie betrayed Julian's trust by letting him read the script. But this tactic only confirms

Julian's sense that Andreas is "evil"; he still will not work with him.

Ten years later, in 1962, Julian appears to have changed his mind. Robbie and Sydney come to the successful tryout — directed by Andreas — of "Betrayal" in New Haven. The play is headed for Broadway, and a movie version seems likely. Afterwards, the four characters meet on stage. Sydney will not speak to Andreas except to insult him. Robbie is less unfriendly towards Andreas but is still careful and distant. She asks Julian why he chose to let Andreas direct the play instead of handling it through her. Julian replies that he wanted the play to be a success on Broadway. After years of struggle, he has decided that if hiring Andreas is the only way to fully realize his ambitions for his plays, he will hire Andreas.

After Robbie and Sydney leave, Andreas, sure that he is vindicated

at last in Julian's eyes, asks him to dinner but Julian declines. When Andreas protests that their relationship has been exclusively business — that he'd like to renew their friendship — Julian repeats his refusal in stronger terms: because Andreas is talented, well-connected and understands his plays, Julian will bend his principles and maintain a professional relationship with him. But personal relationships are another matter; there he will not bend. He leaves Andreas standing alone on the stage.



Dennis Boutsikaris plays Andreas



Evan Handler plays Julian



Laura Esterman plays Robbie



Daniel Oreskes plays Sydney

area, she allows Andreas to read the script against Julian's wishes.

Several months later, when Julian finds that he is unable to get financial backing for "Betrayal," he comes to Robbie for help recruiting a major star. Overwhelmed with guilt and worried that Julian will despise her, Robbie confesses to Julian that she named names to the Committee. The process was worse than she had anticipated; they forced her to give them at least one person who had not already been named. Julian makes it clear that,

Arthur Laurents on Jolson Sings Again

an interview with the playwright

Study Guide: When the House Un-American Activities Committee started to investigate Hollywood, did you have a sense at the time, that it was ever actually about threats to American security?

Arthur Laurents: Never. I'll tell you what it was about. [It was] a political football — just as today with them using the crime bill and health care — to get oneupmanship. I mean the last thing it seems that any of them cares about is crime or health care. The Republicans wanted to defeat the Democrats. The Republicans were pre-empting the cold war issue. It was just for politics. The reason they came to Hollywood was for publicity. That's where you could get the movie names. I mean no one ever proved that there was one piece of Communist propaganda in any movie.

SG: One reason to go to Hollywood was that the investigation would be high-profile, but — and this is implicit in Jolson where three of the characters are Jewish — the campaign against Hollywood was also anti-Semitic.

AL: Yes. Hollywood was invented by Jews. And they invented the American dream on

film, which was all the WASPs with their white picket fences and all their lovely nuclear families. What the bankers, who were not Jewish, didn't realize, was that this would become a multi-million dollar industry. That's when they began to move in. So part of this was an anti-Semitic campaign — because connections between Jews and Communists always seem to be like Mutt and Jeff — and that was the way they could move in on a very lucrative business.

SG: Why were so many Jews in the Communist Party?

AL: Because the Communist Party fought anti-Semitism. Little did the American Communists know how anti-Semitic the Russians were. But in this country one of the few organizations that fought anti-Semitism, that fought for civil rights for what were then called Negroes was the Communist Party. Which was why a lot of people joined.

SG: In Jolson, Julian's screenplay is changed from being a film about a Jew to a film about a Negro.

AL: That happened to me. My first play was called Home of

the Brave. It was about a Jew. And they made it about a Negro. And they said to me, that's a quote in the script, they said, "Jews have been done." That's right from life.

SG: And Julian says that there's no connection between the experience of being a Jew and being a Negro in this country because being a Negro is so much worse. But since Julian is gay, he has another strike against him. Were you trying to make a connection between being a Jew and being a homosexual in this country?

AL: In this sense, I've written another play which is going on after Jolson, in which someone says that the vast majority of this country is prejudiced against Blacks, Jews and homosexuals. I absolutely believe it. And, at the time, in the '50s...it was worse to be a homosexual than a Communist. You could certainly tell your mother you were a Communist, but you could not tell her you were a homosexual.

SG: Julian actually comes out. He's out by 1962 in the first and last scenes of the play. In this world, is coming out a matter of principle for him?

AL: Yes. He also says something that to me is important, in an artistic sense, he says "I couldn't even say it," and

interview continued
on next page →

Arthur Laurents interview (cont'd from page 3)

can you say it now?" He says, "I wrote a play about it and got rid of it." That's one of the functions of writing.

SG: When you got out of the army, I notice that *Home of the Brave*, which is a play about betrayal and anti-semitism —

AL: That's when I got rid of that.

SG: Yes, that came out in 1946 — you got rid of that right away. Was this material harder to come to terms with?

AL: No. The material that was hard to come to terms with after the Jewishness was the homosexuality. But I lived openly. I fell in love and lived with a man in 1954 whom I still live with. And I thought that was right.

SG: It seems a very different world and a very different movement now.

AL: It was so furtive and concealed then, and yet you find the extremes of bigotry just as strong today. The religious right is just horrendous with the things they say.

SG: Do you think the witch hunt is still going on?

AL: Oh, it is.

SG: Where do you see it?

AL: Well, what is the bad word in congress? "Liberal." The person you call a liberal is then dead politically and the issue is dead. It's going on with liberals. It's going on with gays. It is still not politically correct to be anything but a straight WASP. The country is better — there's no doubt about that — but it's lip service.

WHO'S ARTHUR LAURENTS?

Arthur Laurents is a director and writer of plays, musicals, novels and movies. Do you recognize any of his work?

PLAYS & MUSICALS :

West Side Story

(he wrote the dialogue)

Gypsy

(he wrote the dialogue)

Home of the Brave

MOVIES: (he wrote the screenplays)

The Way We Were

The Turning Point

Rope

The Snake Pit

Why did people in the United States join The Communist Party?

In the 1930s it seemed to many in this country that the capitalist system was on the brink of total collapse. During the 1920s, the country had experienced a financial and industrial boom. Consumer goods became available on an unprecedented scale and many — farmers and unskilled laborers were notably excluded — enjoyed a level of affluence their parents could not have imagined.

When the bottom fell out of the economy, the political right lost its grip on the White House and, to a great extent, on the country as a whole. To many on the right, the package of social welfare policies Roosevelt's administration instituted in the early 1930s known as the "New Deal" was a frightening step towards permanently institutionalized socialism — and even communism. The Communist Party of the United States was a perfectly legal organization and many joined.

Why did people leave the Communist Party?

With the Nazi's invasion of Poland in 1939 and America's subsequent entry into the war two years later, defeating fascism quickly became more important to many in the Party than promoting communism, and membership declined.

Many also left because they were afraid of being arrested or deported; by the end of the 1930s, the seeds of the anti-Communist hysteria which would later become known as McCarthyism (after Joseph McCarthy, the most flamboyant and unprincipled of those who exploited the public's fears) had already been sown. In 1938, Martin Dies, a Republican congressman, established the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). At the time, the Committee was chiefly concerned with investigating supposed Nazi activities in the U.S. and so had broad, bi-partisan support. However, after finding little to investigate in this area, the focus of the Committee's work quickly shifted to investigating hard-line Communists. In 1940, Congress passed the Smith Act which outlawed teaching or advocating the "duty, necessity, desirability or propriety of overthrowing or destroying any government in the United States by force or violence," or organizing or belonging to a group with that aim. Belonging to the Communist Party became a federal crime.

By the time of the Allied victory in 1945, HUAC had broadened its duties to include harassing those who simply espoused left-wing or other kinds of "radical" ideas. With each passing year after the war, white middle-class America became ever more fervently conformist.

Pre- and Post-play discussion questions

Senator
Joseph
McCarthy



(continued from previous page)

If the Communist Party was legal, why was HUAC'S investigation so threatening to former Communists? What was the blacklist?

The Committee supposedly couldn't put anyone in jail just for having once been a Communist. But many were put in jail, ostensibly for other reasons. Further, the Committee could make it impossible for a person to hold any kind of government job (including teaching at a public university) or to work in certain industries — including the film industry. The owners of the film studios, afraid of government censure and the threat of public boycotts at the box office, kept a "blacklist" of Communists, former Communists and Communist sympathizers. Once blacklisted, an actor, writer, director or agent would suddenly be unable to find work.

On the surface, HUAC's investigations were a fight to expose subversives who might be a danger to the security of the nation. But as the investigations dragged on and broadened, they became a war on difference and on dissent: on racial, religious and sexual minorities, the foreign-born, and on anyone with views left of the increasingly conservative political center. By the time HUAC set its sights on Hollywood, the focus of the investigations was not just on whether people had committed potentially subversive acts, but on whether they had at any time harbored potentially subversive thoughts.

Pre-Play

1. Get a copy of the Bill of Rights and read the First Amendment. The following actions have all been seen as violations of First Amendment rights. What do you think?

- Trying to pass legislation to make burning the flag of the United States a crime
- Putting warning labels on music with sexually explicit or violent lyrics, or prohibiting the sale of music to minors
- Government regulation of the content of television programs
- Attempting to suppress a Ku Klux Klan demonstration
- Requiring that public school teachers take an oath of loyalty to the United States
- Trying to ban people who are openly homosexual from teaching in public schools
- Requiring that gays in the military keep silent about their sexuality
- Denying government funding to recognized artists because some people see their work as obscene, pro-gay, anti-Christian or Un-American
- Filing lawsuits against makers and distributors of sexually explicit materials on the basis that pornography is inherently degrading to women and thus violates their civil rights
- Establishing rules on school campuses banning "hate speech"
- Denying people entry to this country on the basis of their political views or affiliations

2. According to a University of Wisconsin survey, the following books are the ones most often banned from school and public libraries:

The Catcher in the Rye
by J.D. Salinger

The Grapes of Wrath

by John Steinbeck

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck

Go Ask Alice [anonymous]

Forever... by Judy Blume

Our Bodies, Ourselves by the Boston Women's Health Collective

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn

by Mark Twain

The Learning Tree by Gordon Parks

My Darling, My Hamburger

by Paul Zindel

1984 by George Orwell

Black Boy by Richard Wright

The Canterbury Tales

by Geoffrey Chaucer

See how many of these books are in your school library. If one is not in your library, ask your librarian about it and see if you can find out why not. Read one of the books on this list and see if you can come up with a list of reasons why people might not want you to read it. How does the decision to ban this book make you feel about your first amendment rights?

3. Interview members of your family about their experiences of life in this country during the late 1940s and early 1950s. How did they view the politics of the time? Was it a good time for them? Did they feel it was a good time for the country? Why?

4. Related topics and people to research and report on:

- Joseph McCarthy, Richard Nixon, Roy Cohn and McCarthyism
- Julius and Ethel Rosenberg
- The Civil Rights movement in the late 1940s and early 1950s
- The history of government censorship in the United States
- The American Civil Liberties Union
- The Cold War and the Korean War

more on the next page

... More Activities

5. In the 1950s, many people were afraid of Communists; it seemed to them that Communism threatened the political security and moral structure of the free world. Can you think of any groups today that seem as dangerous to people? Why are people afraid of these groups? Is there any group or idea so dangerous that you think anyone associated with it ought to be watched closely, put in jail or kicked out of the country? Why?
6. Have you ever been punished for expressing your views? How? Why? Did you feel the punishment was just or unjust? Why?
7. Do you see yourself, your school, your relatives, your friends, or your government as being intolerant of "difference"? Have you ever dismissed or rejected someone because he/she had different ideas, religious beliefs or opinions? What about someone who dresses differently? Has a different skin color? A different accent? A different body shape? A different sexual orientation? Do you have a lot of friends who are different from you or are most of your friends pretty similar to you? Why?
8. When have you felt pressure to conform? Have you ever done or said things you didn't want to just to "fit in" with a group of people? Have you ever done something you felt was wrong because other people expected it of you?
9. Write or improvise a scene in which a policeman or school principal is trying to get a former gang member to "name names" of people in the gang.

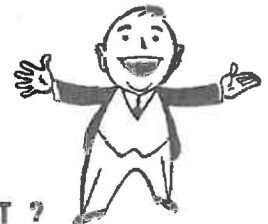


"I Pledge Allegiance To Joe McCarthy
And To The Committee Which Stands For Him—"

This political cartoon ran in the newspaper in June of 1954. What does it say about Senator McCarthy's power?

Post-Play

1. In *Jolson Sings Again*, Sydney is blacklisted from the film studios because he will not cooperate with HUAC. He in turn personally "blacklists" anyone who has cooperated with the Committee. At your school, what kinds of things might you say or do that would cause teachers to blacklist you? What about your friends? Is there anything you might do or say that would earn you the respect of one group but cause the other to blacklist you?
2. In the play, in order to support her family, Robbie feels compelled to cooperate with people she despises in order to hold on to her job. Does she do the right thing? To what lengths would you go in order to keep your job? What if your job is your family's only source of support?
3. Some of the characters in *Jolson Sings Again* find that, given the circumstances, they are willing to bend principles they once believed were sacred to them. Write down three principles that you hold sacred. You may believe, for example, that violence is never justified, that there is nothing important enough to justify betraying a friend, that abortion is a woman's right or that abortion is always wrong, etc. Have three people question you on your principles. Have them try to come up with situations in which you might compromise your principles. Are your principles absolute or are there circumstances under which you might "bend"? Where do you draw the line and why?
4. In the play, Julian has used the Communist Party as a way to hide his homosexuality. Do you know anyone who feels it necessary to keep his or her sexual orientation a secret? What would be the consequences of "coming out" in your school? In your family? In your community?
5. Andreas insists that people are more important than principles. Is he right? If Andreas is Julian's friend, is Julian wrong to abandon him? Wouldn't it be more broad-minded and understanding to forgive him, work through their differences and continue the friendship? What about your friends? Would you ever abandon them? Why?



WHO DID WHAT?

This guide was written by David Hlavsa who heads the Drama Department at Saint Martin's College in Lacey, Washington, & edited by Ted Sod. The Rep's Artist-in-Residence. It was designed by S. D. Cox & A.J. Howell using Aldus PageMaker® 5.0. What do you think? Let us know! Send your feedback to: Ted Sod, Seattle Rep, 155 Mercer, Seattle, Washington 98109