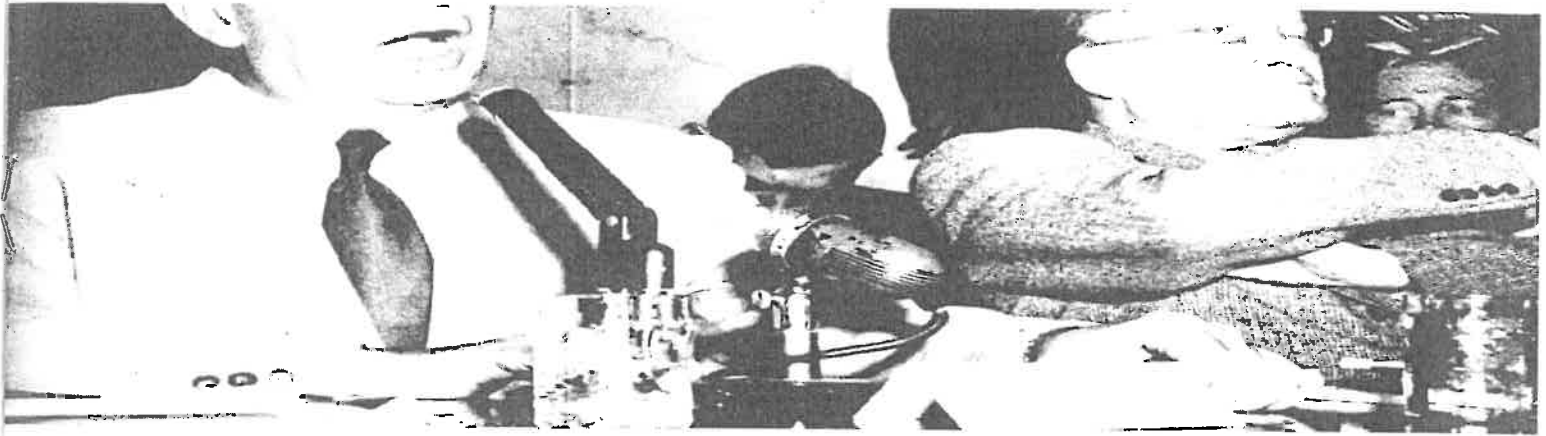


Under
Arthur
Remember
in Jolson
BY DAVID HLAVSA

PHOTO BY KATHLEEN KING





They say when you have been in battle, the memory of it never leaves you, never fades from its most vibrant hues. Everyone has a test in life they must pass or fail. For Arthur Laurents, the distinguished author of a wide variety of works from West Side Story to The Turning Point, that battle, that test, was the "blacklist" of suspected Communists after World War II. Such experiences galvanize that sense in us that we call our "moral compass"; long-time Rep associate David Hlavsa helps us understand the man and the moment.

Pressure

Laurents sings the Blacklist Sings Again

Arthur Laurents—In the '30s, by and large, everybody with a good heart and a good brain was left-wing. If you had any belief in civil rights of any kind, you were a liberal. Or, as I say, the word then was progressive. The Communist Party was legal, and it only became illegal after the witch hunt began.

David Hlavsa—To be honest, the first question that occurred to me when I was thinking of interviewing you was "Are you now or have you ever been...?"

AL—No, I never was. They took my passport away and I was blacklisted because I supported a lot of left-wing causes and spoke for them and raised money and wrote for them. It was guilt by association. And in another period, I would never have answered that question. Now, of course, it doesn't matter, but then I thought it was nobody's business.

DH—In the play, Andreas says he was in the Party for about five

minutes. And I'm not clear on whether Sidney is still in the Party.

AL—He is.

DH—Why did so many people leave?

AL—Some left at the time of the Hitler-Stalin Pact. Some left when the witch hunt began. It scared the hell out of people because people lost jobs left and right. They informed on each other, they informed on their friends, on their families. It was wild.

DH—Did you have a sense at the time, when the House Un-American Activities Committee started to investigate Hollywood, that it was ever actually about threats to American security?

AL—Never. Tell you what it was about. It began with Truman, who started a loyalty oath for federal employees, and that went into the universities as well. It was a political football — just as the crime bill and health care are today. 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 trying to preempt the cold war issue. So Truman, to prove he was more of a patriot than any Republican, started the loyalty oath. It was just for politics.

The reason they came to Hollywood was for publicity. That's where you could get the movie names. They suggested it, but no one ever proved that there was one piece of Communist propaganda in any movie. Ginger Roger's mother became a big "au-

thority” on Communism in the movies. She said it was Communist propaganda that her daughter was forced to say “share and share alike” in a movie called *Tender Comrade*. That shows you how bizarre things were. They also accused Shirley Temple of being a Communist!

DH—I also read that at one point they were investigating the Girl Scouts.

AL—And Christopher Marlowe.

DH—Of course one reason to go to Hollywood was that the investigation would be high-profile, but now it seems to me that with people pillorying the NEA, that it’s another political football and it’s anti-artist.

AL—Right. Absolutely.

DH—The campaign against Hollywood — and this is implicit in *Jolson*, in which three of the characters are Jewish — was also anti-Semitic.

AL—Yes. There’s a speech I wrote, which may or may not go into the play, that points up an irony. 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. That was the way they could move in on a very lucrative business.

There’s another thing related to that: why there were so many Jews in the Communist Party. 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.

DH—The one character in your play who lacks moral principles is a gentile. So where does Jewishness fit into the moral puzzle here?

AL—I think with the Ten Commandments. I think Jews are more puritanical. They’re more liberal. I’m a Jew, so obviously I’m biased, but I think you’ll find in the social history of this country that there are more Jews involved, on a percentage basis, than anyone else.

DH—So then the strength of your Jewish

characters is their sense of principles. But they are also destroyed by their own principles?

AL—Absolutely.

DH—Andreas, the only non-Jew in the play, says that people are important, not principles. And it seems to me that, to some degree, he has a point. Obviously, there’s a moral conflict at the center of this play. When Julian is deciding whether or not to work with Andreas and when Robbie is deciding whether or not to testify, what are those choices finally about for you? Can you articulate that moral conflict?

AL—Yes. What is the line you don’t cross?

DH—Between...

AL—Each of us has his line. What is my

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moral center? How far will I go to keep my principles? When I was writing the play, before I started, I thought I knew that very clearly. When I began to write the play, I realized I didn’t, if I wanted to be honest. Zero Mostel had been named and couldn’t work for five years. When he was about to do *Fiddler on the Roof*, he was asked if had a problem working with a director who had been an informer. Zero said, “I don’t have to have lunch with him, do I?” You can look at that statement two ways: he’s keeping his principles or he’s copping out. And the hard thing is that each person has to make that decision for himself or herself.

DH—So you see Julian’s choice at the end of the play — to work with Andreas but not to be his friend — is really an ambivalent one for you?

AL—Yes. He is not on his white horse. He is compromising his principles. It’s sad.

DH—On the other hand, you have Sidney

who refuses to compromise his principles the slightest bit for anyone and can’t work, can’t help to support his family ...

AL—Sidney goes down to defeat. Is it worth it? The only person who can decide is you yourself.

DH—What about Robbie? She decides to inform.

AL—I’m glad you brought this up. To me it’s one of the most interesting things about the play. She says to Julian, “What’s the difference between me and Andreas?” The difference is remorse: she *knows* she did a bad thing. Andreas doesn’t.

DH—The line that you have about “People are important, not principles,” it’s a line that comes up in *The Way We Were*.

AL—Absolutely. I had to fight to get it in that movie. They kept taking it out. I kept putting it back. They didn’t want to hear about that.

DH—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.

DH—And Julian says that there’s no connection between the experience of being a Jew and being a Negro in this country, because Negroes had it so much worse.

AL—And particularly, what was so incredible to me, the picture was a big success — despite the fact that the army was totally segregated. How did they explain having a black in that unit? I don’t know.

DH—They were trying to link the experience of being a Jew with the experience of being a Negro. 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? I was thinking about the ability to “pass” for heterosexual or for being a gentile.

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 — the order is wrong. There’s the least against Jews. That time, in the ’50s, was before any of these liberations. What Julian says about pretending to be in the party because people would think you

were straight, that was absolutely the attitude. 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.

DH—Julian actually comes out. He's out by 1962 in the first and last scenes in this 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 Robbie says to him, "Well why 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.

DH—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.

DH—Do you think the witch hunt is still going on?

AL—Oh, it is.

DH—Where do you see it?

AL—Well, what is the bad word in congress and the media? "Liberal." I mean, they would rather anything than be called a liberal. It's going on with gays, too. It is still not politically correct to be anything but a straight WASP. The country is better, there's no doubt about that, but so much is political lip service. Even on the simplest level. There are still restricted country clubs.

DH—How would you characterize the difference between New York and Hollywood in the late '40s and early '50s? Julian feels this pull to stay in New York, but they're always trying to get him out to Hollywood. Was there a kind of ambivalence for you in the transition between theatre and film?

AL—The position of the writer is identical in Hollywood today to what it was when I started there: at the bottom of the totem pole. They have no respect for the writer because they're afraid of words.

DH—Why are they afraid of words?

AL—Because they can't speak English.

DH—In a nutshell.

AL—Oh, as you see, I'm really very unopinionated.

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she chose to tell the police that it was a black man who stole her children?" I would want to get the jurors talking about why they thought she made that decision. It gets at the attitude that "certain people" commit certain kinds of crime. In the *Voir Dire* case, it gets the idea across that if you want to set somebody up, you choose somebody with skin color that's different than yours.

Q—You seem to be creating scenarios in which potential jurors can role-play.

"Many lay people think that you select your jury. I would disagree with that. You don't select each juror, you de-select the 'U-boat captains.'" — Kate Pflaumer

PROS—Yes. What Jeff would be doing with those questions is subtly introducing his theory of the case, that his client was framed. Part of how a good lawyer persuades is by making the jurors think that they got there on their own.

DEF—There are cases in which a lawyer might make a determination that race is a difference, and that people of a certain race—the African-American race, for example—have certain perspectives that

"If you could give me 12 people who have absolutely no biases and no preconceptions and were open-minded, I would take them. ... But that's not the way the world works." — Jeff Robinson

could be helpful to the defense. If there are blacks on the jury and Kate, as a prosecutor, excuses a black, as soon as she does that, there are certain very technical legal challenges that can be done. You can end up in chambers with the judge, who decides the challenge.

PROS—There's a legal rule against excluding any race or a male or female simply because they are. You have to have some other reason for excluding a nationality.

Q—In *Voir Dire*, it's not just that Carmichael is an African American, he's the principal of the high school, a leader of the community. So the stakes are raised. Can you speak to that aspect of it?

PROS—As a prosecutor, I would want to know a lot of things about how these people are as parents, how they feel about drug education in the schools, how they feel about teachers being role models, how they feel about how the schools are run. If you find some people who are very dissatisfied with the schools, they're going to be ready to accept that this guy is part of the problem.

Q—If you're his defense attorney, what do you want to know?

DEF—I'm going to be interested in any of the jurors who have children in the school district where my guy is the principal. And if any of them know him. I'm going present my client as a leader in the community and put on character witnesses who say, "This is an outstanding man."

You then play into the sort of thing — and this is from my own experience — if I'm driving in my car with a baseball cap on at 10:30 at night, I'm not a Harvard Law School graduate, I'm a colored guy in the Central District. If I am pulled over by the police, I am very careful about what I do and how I act. So it's the specter of this man who has everything right by white society's standards who, when he's out on the street without the protection of his status in the community, is just another colored guy who can be set up by the police.

I would start talking about police officers, asking the jury, "Do you think somebody who has testified a hundred times may appear more comfortable in the courtroom than someone who has never testified in their life? And then to go from there to, "Do you know what an undercover police officer does? How would you go about telling if an undercover police officer who is trained to lie is telling the truth?" This to start suggesting that if my guy gets up and appears nervous and is sweating, it's just that this is the first time he's ever been in this situation.

PROS—The prosecutor needs, very subtly, to build the credibility of the police, but you can't do it in a blatant way, because if you do it in a blatant way, they'll think there's something wrong. Jeff, on the other hand, has to very quietly tear it down. 📖