

Witch Hunt in Washington State

A new docudrama unearths Cold War history

In 1951, Florence Bean James departed Seattle in a cloud of public recrimination and private despair. The Seattle Repertory Playhouse—the popular, ambitious theatre company that James had co-founded and successfully overseen for more than 20 years—was defunct. Florence’s husband and fellow theatre manager, Burton James, had recently died of a heart condition at age 63, and everything the couple had worked to achieve in their adopted city—as college and university educators and as ardent producers of classical, modern and multiethnic drama—had been swept away by a tide of virulent anti-Communism that resulted in their vilification before the Canwell Committee on Un-American Activities, a state-supported probe which entangled Seattle artists and academics in its net of Cold War suspicion and hysteria.

The cozy 340-seat theatre the Jameses created in tandem with actor Albert Ottenheimer still stands on University Way in Seattle, but it is currently owned by the University of Washington and used primarily for student productions. For decades, the building (now called the Play-

By Misha Berson

house) has borne no evidence of its founders—no sign or bust or portrait commemorating the urban pioneers who introduced the works of such important playwrights as Sean O’Casey and Luigi Pirandello to local audiences, who founded the state’s first school touring drama program, who housed and nurtured the federally sponsored Seattle Negro Company during the New Deal.

This month, that historical neglect will finally be rectified with the installation of a bronze plaque in the theatre that will pay tribute to the Seattle Repertory Playhouse and its originators. The late Florence and Burton James are to be honored in another way as well, when they appear as characters in *All Powers Necessary and Convenient*, a fervent new docudrama by Mark Jenkins about the Canwell Committee and its targets. Staged by Intiman Theatre associate director Victor Pappas, with a 30-member cast of professionals and students, the University of Washington production premieres Feb. 4 at, ironically, the same playhouse that was engulfed in controversy a half century ago.

A dozen or more contemporary plays (such as *Are You Now or Have You Ever*

Been? by Eric Bentley) and films (*The Front*, *Hollywood on Trial*) have already attempted to set the murky record straight on the blacklisting that devastated the lives of many American artists, academics and public officials during what blacklisted playwright Lillian Hellman has termed the “scoundrel time.” And some authors have

“Canwell entangled Seattle artists in a net of Cold War suspicion.”

tried, with varying success, to express the ineffable—the polluted atmosphere of fear and betrayal swirling over entire communities, during a decade of rampant name-calling and Cold War panic.

But after Seattle actor-writer Jenkins stumbled by accident upon the transcripts of the investigative hearings that rocked Washington state in 1947–48, he decided there was yet another potent story to tell about the era—and another way to tell it.

What Jenkins unearthed, in the vacation cabin of a friend, was the two-volume, 1,000-page verbatim record of the Canwell Committee. Chaired by conservative state legislator Albert Canwell of Spokane, this government-backed public inquiry was invested with “all powers necessary and convenient” to root out the Red Menace in Washington. Testimony from 80 witnesses, during two turbulent Canwell-led sets of hearings, resulted in the firing of three University of Washington professors, the academic probation of three others, the blotching of many more reputations, and the destruction of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse.

Fascinated by this “buried” chapter of Northwest history, Jenkins interviewed leading players in the imbroglio (including John Caughlan, the attorney for some of the accused professors, and Canwell—both now in their nineties), and spent several years forging his three-hour epic. A blend of on-the-record fact and provocative fiction, Jenkins calls it “a personal artistic response to a tragic series of events.”

“Most young people in Seattle, and those who are not local natives, just



Naming names: Protesters picket Seattle’s Canwell Committee hearings in 1951.

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haven't heard about this," says Jenkins, now a full-time instructor in UW's Professional Actor Training Program. "But I think the 50th anniversary of the Canwell Committee is a watershed, and it's really time to re-examine that dark period in our culture. It was such an extreme period, and the wounds from it still haven't healed."

Particularly intriguing to Jenkins was the bombshell effect the hearings had on Seattle's overlapping academic and theatrical communities. Among those depicted in the play are Melvin Rader, Angelo Pelligrini and Joe Butterworth, all professors whose teaching careers at UW were terminated or stalled when they refused to testify about either their own political activities or the politics of others.

The rise and fall of the Seattle Repertory Playhouse itself is a saga perhaps worthy of its own full-length drama. The Jameses and Ottenheimer, seasoned New

York stage artists, came west to teach at Seattle's Cornish School of the Arts. There, they forged the city's first major subscription-based troupe, bringing a new sophistication and idealism to the local theatre.

"Their politics were liberal and their taste in drama reflected the 'art theatre' of their time," noted UW drama professor Barry B. Witham, in his informative essay, "The Playhouse and the Committee." And effortlessly, in a labor-union town with strong liberal sympathies, the Jameses found an eager audience for their imaginative versions of *Peer Gynt*, the black gospel musical *In Abraham's Bosom*, and Clifford Odets's incendiary *Waiting for Lefty*—a play that so offended the publishers of the *Seattle Times* that the daily newspaper stopped covering the company's shows altogether.

But it was Florence James's 1934 visit to Russia, and her involvement in a range of liberal causes, that ultimately brought her before the Canwell Committee in 1948. A paid witness named George Hewitt, a man James swore she had never met, testified that he knew her as a fellow American Communist Party member, and saw her at party functions in Moscow in 1932. When James and her husband tried to refute Hewitt's charges at the hearings, they were evicted from the room. Later, other former Communist Party members testified against the Jameses. And when the couple invoked their constitutional right not to answer questions about their political beliefs, they were indicted for contempt.

As members of a group of resistant Canwell targets dubbed "The Seattle Six," the couple marshaled local support and fought their misdemeanor convictions in the state courts. But the charges were ultimately upheld. Though spared the indignity of prison, the strain and furor broke Burton's fragile health and destroyed the couple's livelihoods. The Rep's box-office income plunged from a respectable

\$40,000 for the 1946-47 season to \$14,000 two years later. In another bitter blow, the 99-year lease on the Playhouse was suddenly dissolved, and the building was quietly sold to the University of Washington.

While verbatim chunks of the Canwell Committee hearings, pertinent headlines from the local press, period recordings, slide images and interviews form the framework of *All Powers Necessary and Convenient*, Jenkins also took the bold course of inventing "behind the scenes" dialogue for many of the real-life characters. In a style reminiscent of the agit-prop "Living Newspaper" productions wrought by the Federal Theater Project during the '30s, each of the play's dozens of scenes have projected supertitles to indicate whether the events and dialogue are from the "theatre of fact" or the "theatre of speculation." The conversations Jenkins invents sometimes cast actual people in a very dim or emphatically sympathetic light. In one scene, Canwell is shown blackmailing a young woman into becoming his committee aide. In other sequences, the beleaguered Joe Butterworth tries to ease the confusion of his mentally handicapped son. Also imagined are the back-room negotiations between Canwell and his associates and George Hewitt, with the clear implication that this witness-for-hire was encouraged to lie.

An admirer of Emily Mann's documentary-based "theatre of testimony," Jenkins says he at first tried to fashion his script entirely from the hearing transcripts. "But it wasn't really a play," he explains, "just a series of fragments." His

taped conversations with Canwell (who still justifies his committee's work and his role in it), Harold Eby (one of the targeted UW professors) and others gave him added material to work with—as did information provided by Edwin Guthman, a retired *Seattle Times* reporter who earned a Pulitzer Prize in 1949 for his stories about George Hewitt's role in implicating University of Washington professor Melvin Rader.

But Jenkins still felt something was missing. "What I had was just too clinical," he contends. "I wanted to explore the real nature of this atmosphere of fear. I wanted to recreate the chaos behind the

scenes. I wanted to look at the American psyche, and what it is in us that makes us turn on ourselves and look for scapegoats." Then why not recast the entire work as fiction? "Because if it were all fiction people would think I was exaggerating. I didn't want to lose that charge of actuality. I wanted to have it all."

Director Pappas agrees that the added scenes of personal interaction "increase the play's dramatic viability. And I want to blur the line between fact and fiction at times, because I think in terms of theatre, some of Mark's speculations are almost as valid as the facts."

Jenkins says he has consulted libel attorneys, "who assure me that this will pass muster. If someone is a public figure, speech about them is protected." After reading the script, Caughlin, a survivor of the hearings who figures in real and fictive scenes, told Jenkins recently, "It was very strange to read words that I have not spoken, in some cases could not have spoken, and on a few occasions wish I had spoken." But he too gave the project his blessing.

Though the University of Washington doesn't escape unscathed for its on-the-record response to the anti-Communist witch hunts, Jenkins says UW drama department chair Sarah Nash Gates and

other school officials "have been totally supportive, and very excited about what I'm doing." In fact, the university is planning an array of public forums in conjunction with the run of *All Powers Necessary and Convenient*.

Perhaps the most stirring event, however, will be a special matinee performance of the play followed by a reception dedicated "to the defiant survivors" of the Canwell Committee probes, their family members and friends. On that afternoon, the plaque honoring the Jameses and Ottenheimer for their local contributions will be unveiled at the Playhouse—a gesture of gratitude and respect none of the three honorees lived long enough to see. **AT**

Misha Berson is on a year's leave from her position as theatre critic of the Seattle Times.