Books

Canada Lee’s Curtain Call

Becoming Something: The Story of Canada Lee, by Mona Z. Smith ’94GSAS. Faber and Faber. $27.00.

By
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If Canada Lee had been born 10 years later, he might still be a household name. He was the Sugar Ray Robinson of his day and “the best Negro actor of his time,” according to *The Ring* magazine and the *New York Times*, respectively. But cruel circumstances, and even crueler people, colluded to banish him from the public eye and, ultimately, from the public’s memory.

Lee Canegata, born in 1907 and rechristened “Canada Lee” by a flustered ring announcer, was great at just about everything he tried — and he needed to be, because he certainly never caught a break. He shot to the top of the welterweight ranks in the early 1930s, but the benighted boxing establishment — still embarrassed by the flamboyance of the first black heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson — wouldn’t let him fight for the title. Later, after he’d made his name on Broadway, Lee began using it to call for racial and social justice. But civil-rights activism, which would transform the country in the 1950s and ’60s, was a ticket to the blacklist at the time he practiced it. Like his good friend Paul Robeson, Lee was ultimately driven from the spotlight by overzealous anti-Communists. And because he had given most of his memorable performances on the stage, rather than on the screen, he left behind no body of work for later generations to appreciate. His rediscovery would require circumstances almost as improbable as those that had obscured him in the first place.

Thankfully, it all came together one day in Butler Library. While pursuing her master’s in theatre at Columbia, former journalist Mona Z. Smith ’94GSAS happened upon an intriguing footnote in a book about McCarthyism — a one-line reference to

Canada Lee as someone literally killed by the blacklist. This sparked a decade-long obsession with Lee's life, culminating in the recent publication of *Becoming Something: The Story of Canada Lee*. Smith managed to track down and talk to the actor's blind, octogenarian widow, Frances Lee Pearson, and an impressive number of surviving acquaintances. Using reams of primary resources, including those interviews, seven boxes of material Frances had saved, and the same FBI and HUAC files that had helped destroy Lee's life, Smith meticulously reconstructed it.

The book follows Lee from his hardscrabble Harlem boyhood through his various attempts at "becoming something," first as a jockey, then a boxer, then a bandleader, and finally, triumphantly, an actor. Lee made a marquee name for himself playing Bigger Thomas in Orson Welles's 1942 Broadway production of *Native Son*, and went on to star in *The Tempest*, Anna Lucasta, and the film *Cry, the Beloved Country*. He became the first African American to produce a Broadway play *(On Whitman Avenue)*, the first to host a national radio series, and the second, after Robeson, to perform a major Shakespearean part on Broadway.

But Lee was a born fighter, and as his public profile grew, so did his FBI file. He was constantly lending his name and talents to progressive causes, such as the fight to preserve the federal Fair Employment Practices Commission, and in the 1940s that sort of activism inevitably meant contact with real and suspected Communists. Later in the decade, Lee would come under pressure to acknowledge and renounce his "subversive" past. Protesting that he'd "never even joined the Elks," he refused, and soon found himself unemployable. When his passport expired, the government wouldn't renew it. Betrayed, bankrupt, forbidden even to seek work in other countries, and suffering from severe hypertension and kidney failure, Canada Lee died on May 9, 1952, at the age of 45. He had made his last public appearance — at a rally protesting the murder of two black men by a white former policeman — less than a month before.

In the quicksand of McCarthyism, those who kicked hardest went down fastest. In late 1949, when both his acting career and his health were beginning to deteriorate, Lee, unwisely, went on *The Barry Gray Show*, a radio program that had recently become politically provocative in order to boost ratings — the *O'Reilly Factor* of its day. The transcript, as reproduced and paraphrased by Smith, is excruciating to read. Gray and another guest, Mac Clark, bait and browbeat Lee, luring him onto their argumentative ground with leading questions, then cutting him off mid-answer and using his half-answers against him:

“Certain groups become so doggone vehement, so doggone militant,” Clark said, “they lose all sense of direction and pretty soon mayhem and murder, it all becomes part of the picture, which is the Communist picture. And unfortunately fellows like Canada Lee . . . have joined these groups . . . they get in with this violence—”

Violence? Canada interrupted, desperate to put a stop to this. “But Mac—Mac—Mac,” he said, raising his voice over Clark’s. “I never joined a group in my life—”

“But you have!” pounced Barry Gray . . . “You’ve lent your name to advertisements. . . . That is much the same thing.”

“That’s true,” Canada said, hoping for an opening. “That’s true, but—”

But the opening had vanished as Gray and Clark moved in for the kill . . . . Don’t you see, Canada? they said. It doesn’t matter whether you are in fact a member of the Communist Party. If the man on the street, in the subway, and on the bus believes you are a Red, a Pink, a fellow traveler, or a subversive, then you are.

“That’s a fact!” Clark spat. “So if you don’t hold a card, it doesn’t matter—”

“You have joined!” Gray finished smugly.

Not long after the program aired, Lee lost his radio sponsorship. In his short, lopsided battle against the blacklisters, that disastrous interview may have been the knockout blow. One sensitive, scrupulous biography probably won’t rescue Canada Lee from the obscurity to which bad luck and bad faith have sentenced him. But it does give him, for once, the last word.

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