

Finks dramatizes the 1950s anti-communist blacklist

Fred Mazelis
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At the Ensemble Studio Theatre, New York City, March 28-May 5, 2013, directed by Giovanna Sardelli, choreography by Greg Graham

The American entertainment industry blacklist of actors, writers and others accused of left-wing sympathies, beginning in the late 1940s and lasting for more than a decade, has been widely chronicled in memoirs, biographies and histories of the period. It has less often been depicted in the theater and on film. Martin Ritt's 1976 film *The Front* is one of few such efforts.

Finks, Joe Gilford's play based on the lives of his parents, as filtered partly through his own memories, is a welcome and effective contribution to this history. *Finks* is being presented at Manhattan's Ensemble Studio Theatre, and will be there until May 5. Although its main characters are fictional, they are clearly patterned on Jack and Madeline Lee Gilford, the well-known theater couple, also known for work on television and film, who were blacklisted in the 1950s, but later resumed their careers.

Jack died in 1990 and Madeline in 2008. As the play's program explains, "Jack and Madeline Gilford were just two of hundreds of actors, writers and directors who were effectively banned from work in TV and radio for almost a decade."

Joe Gilford's play is centered on the lives of his parents and some of their closest friends and colleagues in the years between 1948 and 1953, a turning point for all of these characters. The younger Gilford was born in 1951, in the middle of the anti-communist hysteria.

The campaign to purge left-wing actors and those who refused to actively join in the witch-hunting began in Hollywood in the late 1940s and spread to radio and television. Though the Red Scare is associated most prominently with Wisconsin Senator Joe McCarthy, it was the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) that subpoenaed the Gilfords, in 1953.

The staging of *Finks*, around a simple but serviceable

set, is unusual and has a good deal to do with the play's effectiveness. Scenes of testimony before HUAC, chaired by the notorious Pennsylvania Democrat Francis Walter, are intercut ingeniously with depictions of the rest of the actors' lives. Walter's hostile insistence that witnesses "answer the question" are quickly followed by dialogue amongst the performers, as they discuss their careers and later attempts to deal with the blacklist.

Another effective touch is the use of fictional names for the main protagonists in the play, while in the witch-hunting scenes and the portrayal of those who "named names" to save their own careers, the "finks" are given their real names.

"Natalie Meltzer" is clearly the stand-in for Madeline Lee, soon to become the wife of Jack Gilford, portrayed as "Mickey Dobbs." Their close friends include "Bobby Gerard," a dancer who is patterned after famous choreographer Jerome Robbins. Bobby is gay and he and Natalie share a close relationship, with a few humorous asides directed at Natalie's function as a "beard," occasionally dating Bobby to mask his homosexuality.

Rounding out the four main characters is "Fred Lang," a somewhat older actor largely based on Philip Loeb, best known for his radio and television role on *The Goldbergs*. Natalie is the most politically committed of this group. She holds house parties to raise funds and promote various causes, while also pursuing Mickey, who is less committed at first, both personally and politically. While it is not spelled out, it appears that Madeline may have been a Communist Party member at this time, at least at the time the play begins.

Soon enough, Natalie wins Mickey's love and they are married, but problems multiply as far as their careers are concerned. Rapid-fire political asides, interspersed with Natalie's work on a radio commercial and her later performances in *The Guiding Light*, the long-running soap opera, make for some lively theater. Soon, however,

Natalie's soap opera character is "killed off" as a means of complying with the blacklist.

Around the same time Mickey is offered a weekly show that would be a big break in his career. The witch hunters, however, are closing in. We "see" the testimony of director Elia Kazan, writer Budd Schulberg and actor Lee J. Cobb, with a few actors taking on a number of roles. Kazan, Schulberg and Cobb all testified as "friendly witnesses," although Cobb was the last and most reluctant.

A turning point comes when Bobby, after warning Natalie that Mickey may cave in, is himself the one who decides to save his career by turning "fink" and naming his friends, including the Gilfords.

Around this time, as Natalie and Mickey are preparing for their own testimony before HUAC, Lang kills himself with an overdose of sleeping pills in a Philadelphia hotel. Although the date has been shifted for purposes of the dramatic version, this is based on the actual fate of Philip Loeb, who was blacklisted after being listed in the notorious June 1950 *Red Channels* publication. After struggling with unemployment, family crises and his own growing depression, he committed suicide in 1955.

Mickey is thrown into crisis, beginning to wonder what continued defiance will accomplish. He and Natalie have meanwhile begun their family with a baby son (who would grow up to write this play). Mickey has been given the chance to "clear" himself by naming others. Natalie sums up her advice: "Think about what you're going to tell your son." The line is obvious, but still effective.

Toward the end Natalie (Madeline)'s testimony is presented—an obvious exception to the previous practice of providing the real names for the HUAC witnesses. Natalie's insistence on answering every one of Walter's questions with questions of her own is another telling and humorous episode. In refusing to answer his questions, she takes the 1st, 4th, 5th and 8th Amendments to the Bill of Rights. The use of the 5th as protection against self-incrimination wards off a contempt citation, while the 1st, 4th and 8th enable her to denounce, in turn, the Committee's attacks on free speech, its unreasonable search of her thoughts and views, and its cruel and unusual punishment.

The production, directed by Giovanna Sardelli and choreographed by Greg Graham, deserves high praise, and the acting performances must also be noted, especially Aaron Serotsky and Miriam Silverman as Mickey and Natalie (Jack and Madeline Gilford), Leo Ash Evens as Bobby (Jerome Robbins) and Ned Eisenberg as

Fred Lang (Philip Loeb).

One criticism of the play would be of the level of some of the humor bandied about by Mickey and his colleagues in the early part of the performance. There is something flat and false about these scenes. If this is an accurate depiction, Gilford must have gotten better writers.

An additional question concerns the use of some pretty lame political putdowns among the friends. At one point, if memory serves me right, Natalie calls her husband a "Trotskyite, revisionist, running dog imperialist." This language may have been used, but without any further explanation it simply strikes a false note, as if the issues raised by the history of the American Communist Party and the Soviet Union are a laughing matter. The playwright may have feared turning the work into too much of a history lesson, but he does not appear to have dealt with this issue successfully.

The role of Kazan, Schulberg, Robbins and others epitomized the decay of American liberalism, and the rightward political shift and moral degeneration of the American intelligentsia during the Cold War. The informers were individuals who had never complained about Stalin's crimes when Washington and Moscow were allies. Now they tried to point to the crimes of the Stalinist bureaucracy to excuse their own capitulation to the right-wing crusade of US capitalism and to save their careers at the expense of principle and honesty.

These were not merely personal failings, but reflected the political crisis of that period. While *Finks* does not explore all of these issues, it does a service in raising them.

In the end, the Gilfords were more fortunate than some of their friends and acquaintances. Their defiance was ultimately successful, although not without big sacrifices. Both Jack and Madeline Gilford were able to find work, some of it rewarding, and make a living as actors for about three decades beginning in the 1960s.

It should go without saying that the issues raised in *Finks*, in the age of the "war against terror," the Patriot Act and the massive state response to the Boston Marathon bombing, are no less urgent, and in fact are more so, than they were 60 years ago.



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