Actor/Activist Canada Lee Brought to Life in New Play by Arts Alumna

By Jo Kadlecik

The name “Canada Lee” doesn’t ring a lot of bells for most New Yorkers, but they know about him and you’ll probably get blank stares and apologies, Mona Z. Koppelman Smith, 1994 graduate of Columbia’s playwriting program in the School of the Arts, hopes to change that.

Smith first came across Lee’s name shortly after graduating from Columbia while she was working as a booking manager for the jazz club Carla W. Smith—twice the winner of Columbia’s John Golden Award for her plays, “Borderlands,” about two women struggling to survive in Bosnia, and, “Fire in a Dark House” about German Americans during World War II—I wanted to write a new play about the era of bebop music after World War II. She had studied with former playwriting professor Romulius Linney, and interned under Andrei Serban, internationally acclaimed director and playwriting professor in the School of the Arts. Her time with these mentors “opened up another world to me,” and now she wanted to write a play that

explored the intersection of art and music.

She began working through White’s musical archives and found the bebop era was primarily a response by the African American jazz community to black soldiers who had fought in a segregated army against Hitler only to come home to Jim Crow, the Klan and lynchings. Smith went to the New York Public Library (NYPL) to begin reading more about the post World War II world, which led her to Senator Joseph McCarthy’s fight against “Communists” in the U.S. and a book that had a footnote about Canada Lee’s name—and story—jumped out at her.

Having worked for four years as a crime reporter for the “Miami Herald,” Smith (who is currently the manager of adult programs at the Brooklyn Museum of Art) used her journalistic instincts and went to work. She began searching everywhere to answer specific questions about Lee’s life and career, the Broadway productions he performed in, the films he starred in, and mostly, the events he participated in that landed his name on the famous “blacklist” created by the House of Un-American Committee the media and the FBI in 1949.

“As a former newspaper journalist, I responded to the historical, social and political context of Canada’s story,” Smith says. “As a theatre professional, I was perplexed by my complete lack of knowledge about someone who had done significant work on the stage, screen and radio.”

What she found in her search was a troubling lack of information. At the NYPL, she came across only a few playbills and newspaper clippings from the 1930s and 40s about Lee’s performances. From these, she pieced together general information about him: he grew up in Illinois, he was a boxer and then an actor who was discovered by a young director named Paul Robeson. He was cast in a “Negro” production of “MacBeth” for the Work Program Administration Federal Theatre. Lee was championed by the newspaper columnist Ed Sullivan (before his famous television show) and later Hollywood called him for leading roles in movies such as “Cry the Beloved Country,” “Lost Boundaries” and Alfred Hitchcock’s “Lifeboat.”

Smith also learned that Lee was as popular an actor in his day as Sidney Poitier was in the 1960s and Denzel Washington is today. Yet his early death at age 45 of a stress-related heart attack in 1952 cut his career short and his name was lost in obscurity.

Unfortunately, Smith could not find enough information that would link Lee to the government’s un-American concerns. She knew more research would strengthen the play, but she felt she had exhausted her leads.

Then she learned of a donation of Lee’s materials to the NYPL’s Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem. When she tried to access them, however, she was told the contents were too fragile for the public to handle. But Smith was determined and archivists eventually referred her to the attorney who oversaw the donation. He told her to write a letter to the donor outlining her request to review the materials for her play. Smith did, and within a few months, she received a phone call from the donor: Mrs. Frances Pollack Lee, Canada’s widow.

In November of 1998, Mrs. Lee, 79, invited Smith and one of Smith’s research colleagues to visit her at her home in Atlanta and there filled in the missing pieces of Canada’s life for the playwright. They learned of Lee’s numerous civil rights efforts, the speeches he made at rallies and the platform he had as an actor to address the injustices facing African Americans.

Smith recorded 19 hours of tape with Mrs. Lee, and filled three notebooks over that weekend, providing her with more than enough material to continue the play.

And from his civil rights activism, she finally learned what had made McCarthy label Lee dangerous. “F r a n c e s s howed me special equipment rigged for her by family and friends) that he was using to help her comput erize hundreds of Canada’s documents, including all of his letters, diaries and speeches,” Smith says. “She opened her home, her files and her memories to me with profound generosity; she continues to be an inspiration.”

The result of Smith’s tenacity and Mrs. Lee’s kindness is “Becoming Something: Canada Lee,” a two act play based on the actor and activist’s life, a play that took Smith six years in all to complete. It was workshopped last May in Los Angeles and now Smith is co-producing it as it opens in New York May 9—to the 50th anniversary of Canada’s death—at The Kraine Theater, 85 East Fourth Street and runs through May 26.

Smith has even recruited fellow Columbia alumna to help: Tracie Turner Zimelano, MFA ’93, will direct the showcase production and her husband Mike Mariano, MFA ’93, will be the set designer.

Co-producer, Joanne Meyers, is also using her public relations services and has launched a web-site, www.canadalee.com, that resonates with me,” Smith says. “He wanted to leave his mark, to do something for his community and that resonates with me,” Smith says. “He was a far greater force for change than I could ever hope to be, but it’s for the same reason. I simply felt that it was just so important to tell his story on the stage.”

It is in this spirit, she hopes from this point on that people will know who Canada Lee is the new play will achieve.

For performance information on “Becoming Something: Canada Lee,” visit www.canadalee.com or for ticket orders, 212-206-1515.

Carol Gluck, the George Smith Professor in the Department of East Asian Languages and Cultures at Columbia University, has been honored with the Fulbright Program 50th Anniversary Award by the Japan-U.S. Educational Commission, in recognition of her “scholarship of the highest order” and contributions to international understanding in the true Fulbright spirit.

Award ceremonies will be held May 7, where Gluck will give an address, and in New York and Boston in September.

Gluck is an historian of modern Japan in the departments of history, East Asian languages and cultures, and the East Asian Institute.

Judith L. Klavans, director of the Center for Research on Information Access (CRIA) at the Columbia University Libraries and research scientist in computer science, has been awarded a $542,000 grant by the Government of Canada through the Computational Linguistics for Metadata Building (CLIMB) project. The project creatively brings together the most recent developments in natural language processing and matches them to the problems of automatically extracting metadata from text.

The CLIMB project will last approximately two years and proposes to develop innovative uses of computational linguistic techniques to the identification and extraction of descriptive metadata with the purpose of improving access to image collections. The project can be found at http://www.columbia.edu/cu/crica/.

Gauri Viswanathan, professor of English and comparative literature, is research collaborator in a major project on Globalization and Autonomy, 2002-2007. The project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, which awarded a $2.5 million grant. It is based in Toronto and Hamilton, Ontario.

ContentFilm announced it will finance and distribute “The Guys,” a motion picture based on the acclaimed one-act play by Anne Nelson, director of the International Programs for the Graduate School of Journalism. Nelson’s play was commissioned by the National Endowment for the Arts and mounted by the Flea Theatre in lower Manhattan in the wake of the September 11 attacks. The film will star Sigourney Weaver and Anthony LaPaglia, both of whom appeared in the stage production. Weaver’s husband Michael Glazer, who is artistic Director of the Flea Theatre directed the play, and will direct the motion picture. The film version of “The Guys” will be shot on location in New York City.

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