

Becoming Something: The Story of Canada Lee

A new biography by Mona Z. Smith

Press contact: JoAnne Meyers
917-566-7819
press@canadalee.com

www.canadalee.com

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*New biography by Mona Z. Smith based on the life of actor/black activist
Canada Lee to hit book stores on August 19*

NEW YORK, NY – *Becoming Something: The Story of Canada Lee* (Faber & Faber, ISBN: 0571211429), a new biography about the abbreviated life of actor / black activist Canada Lee by award-winning playwright Mona Z. Smith, will be available in bookstores on August 19, 2004. More information: www.canadalee.com.

Mona Z. Smith is a former reporter for *The Miami Herald* and an award-winning playwright who lives in Brooklyn. Her play entitled *Becoming Something: Canada Lee* was staged at the Kraine Theater in New York City in 2002, after a workshop production in Los Angeles in 2000. The play and the book's title echo Lee's sentiment that he was always "on the verge of becoming something"—first a musician, then an athlete, and finally an actor. The book was published by Faber and Faber, Inc., an affiliate of Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Imagine an actor as familiar to moviegoers as Denzel Washington, Samuel L. Jackson and Morgan Freeman are today...who is then virtually deleted from our cultural history. CANADA LEE is such a person.

Once a household name, **Canada Lee** is now a forgotten footnote in the history of the McCarthy era. Born in Manhattan in 1907, Lee was a violin prodigy, jockey and prizefighter before he literally stumbled into acting.

Discovered by **Orson Welles** during auditions for the WPA Negro Theatre Project, Lee first appeared in the famed "voodoo" *Macbeth*. He shot to stardom in Welles' Broadway production of *Native Son*, later appearing in such films as **Alfred Hitchcock's** *Lifeboat* (1944) and *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1951) with a young **Sidney Poitier**. He also appeared in several Broadway production including *South Pacific* (1943), *The Tempest* (1945), *Anna Lucasta* (1944), and *The Dutchess of Malfi* (1946), in which Lee became the first black actor to perform in whiteface. Broadway's first black producer, Lee presented *On Whitman Avenue* in 1946.

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Labeled a Communist by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in 1949, Lee's career was destroyed when he was denounced in a nationally-syndicated column written by long-time friend **Ed Sullivan**. Lee died in 1952 as a result of complications due to high blood pressure.

Lee's downfall came when Judith Coplon, a Justice Department employee who lived in Brooklyn, was caught red-handed passing secret FBI files to her Russian boyfriend, a KGB agent. During her espionage trial, it was discovered that one of the secret FBI files found when she was arrested reported that Canada Lee was a Communist.

The story made headlines in Washington, D.C. Ed Sullivan picked up the story and denounced Canada in his nationally syndicated column. Lee's career was destroyed. He left the United States and made one last film, *Cry, the Beloved Country* with Sidney Poitier, filmed in South Africa. Convinced to return to the U.S. for a promotional tour in 1952, Lee's passport was confiscated. Within weeks, he lapsed into a coma and died.

Author Mona Z. Smith first became interested in the subject seven years ago, when she found Lee's name in books on music, theater and McCarthyism. Lee was described as the most respected black actor of his time; he was also described as a passionate civil rights activist whose death was one of a handful attributed to the blacklist. As a theatre professional and former journalist, she was perplexed by her lack of knowledge about someone who had done significant work on the stage, screen and radio.

Years of following footnotes led her to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, where she discovered seven boxes of data on the actor. She was put in contact with his widow, Frances, now in her 80s and living in Atlanta. Legally blind, Frances showed Smith the special equipment she uses to computerize hundreds of Lee's documents, including his letters, diaries and speeches. Frances, who has been working tirelessly for the last five decades to clear Lee's name, opened her home, her files and her memories to Smith.

An award-winning playwright, previous works have been performed in New York and California. Her credits include the John Golden Award for Playwriting in 1992 and 1994 and Leta Stetter Hollingsworth fellowships in 1992 and 1993. Her play *Borderlands*, a dark comedy about two women struggling to survive in Bosnia, won the 1996 national Berilla Kerr Prize for Playwriting; a new version was a recent winner of the Playwright's Center of San Francisco national competition. *Becoming Something* was workshopped in 2000 at the Strasberg Creative Center in Los Angeles.

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