



*Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students*

**“Freedom and Oppression in the Arts”**

**by Liana Segan**

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Unfortunately, too many people have an understanding of the world as being either/or, black and white, right or wrong. As the current president says “you are for us or against us.” He is pressuring people to agree with his line of thinking, dividing us into groups and labeling those who might challenge his thinking or disagree as unpatriotic. Throughout history, there have always been those who choose to accuse others of wrong thinking. In 2005, the right to speak out and the freedom to question continue to be compromised especially when, patriotism becomes a requirement for entrance into the club of good citizenship and fear lurks in the background.

I feel pressure as an adolescent constantly, in many forms; whether it’s to let a racist remark go unaddressed, allowing a homophobic joke to be told, or a sexist comment to get laughs. We divide ourselves into groups so early in life and learn that membership in one is good, while membership in others is bad.

Like adolescence, politics is a pressure game too, where certain voices get louder and greater attention, and others are suppressed and almost silenced. In politics leaders in power use fear, to pressure the public to see it one way, their way. Political pressure is polarizing which is why I find it so upsetting. I strive to see the world as more than just competing groups.

However, history is a long tale of groups competing for public attention.

In this paper I will be discussing one act of oppression during one particular time in the recent past - The McCarthy era. The main stage for this intolerable play was HUAC - the House Un-American Activities Committee. HUAC’s unofficial role was to locate communists in America so their ideas would not poison our government and social organizations. Joseph McCarthy was a senator in the 1950’s who influenced the witch-hunting ways of HUAC.

HUAC was powerful. They held hearings and made accusations that were damaging to people’s reputations. HUAC established a blacklist, which was a form of censorship. This list presented the names of those who were accused of having communist connections. If you attended a workers meeting, signed a petition or even had a friend who was a sympathizer, your name was added to the list. The blacklist mostly focused on artists and writers, and made people cautious about producing work that could be interpreted as being un-patriotic or disloyal to the United States.

Being on the list made it difficult for employers to hire you whether it be studio heads in Hollywood, or even friends and family members. This blacklist destroyed careers, jeopardized relationships and scarred many people’s lives.

The list became known as the Hollywood Blacklist since most people accused were employed by Hollywood's studios. McCarthy had suggested to HUAC that Hollywood was filled with people who were radical thinkers, who challenged the government. Hollywood was being singled out as influencing people to think and question the rules of society. In other words, to think unpatriotically, and this was bad!

I was impressed as I read more about these times that many courageous writers, filmmakers, playwrights and dancers continued to challenge the blacklist and the anti-communist fever by expressing challenging ideas in their works. It's no coincidence that many of these people, who continued to voice their opinions and speak out against the government, were Jewish.

Arnold Forester, a journalist in the 1950's, said, "Jews in that period were automatically suspect. The general mood was that if you scratch a Jew, you find a communist"

Jewish people have always questioned the status quo, rarely settling for the simple answers and therefore were often perceived as dangerous citizens. Keep in mind that most of the heads of movie studios at the time were Jewish.

My attention was drawn to three Jewish artists whom I will highlight – Arthur Miller, Lillian Hellman and Anna Sokolow – three brave artists who raised their voices, developed challenging ideas and would not be silenced.

I was first introduced to Arthur Miller when in 7<sup>th</sup> grade we read *The Crucible* as part of our study of Puritan and Early Colonial Life. This famous play was about the Salem witch trials of 1692. The Salem Witch Trials, on the surface, were about members of a small Puritan colony accused of being witches. If you were you a witch you would have a direct connection with the devil, making you evil. However, Arthur Miler wrote the play as an analogy to the politics of the 1950's and the McCarthy trials.

Both governments had people right where they wanted them, trapped in a pit of accusations. The only way out was to play by their rules, have your freedom and voice silenced or boldly state your truth and suffer the consequences. Witches did exist in Salem as Communists did exist in the 1950's, but not everywhere the authorities hunted.

Not surprising, Miller's passion for writing about issues that mattered and being outspoken made him a suspect of being a communist. Miller was brought before HUAC but interestingly enough relied on the first amendment that guaranteed freedom of speech not on the Fifth Amendment which protects against self incrimination. The Fifth Amendment was the amendment most commonly used by those who testified, to support them in their efforts to get by the committee. He did refuse to name names and admitted his past pro communist views. Miller was convicted of contempt of congress, fined, and sentenced to one month in prison. The conviction was overturned in 1958 but he continued to remain blacklisted until 1962. Still, Miller enjoyed a successful and socially active career.

The value of pointing out the flaws in the status quo is clearly a Jewish thing. Jews have always been outsiders therefore creating a unique perspective from which to see society. Jews have always been a minority and persecuted, this has made many of us believe that we don't have to accept the world for what it is and we are compelled to work for social change.

Most playwrights have a perspective about the world and communicate that perspective, while serving to entertain. Another Jewish playwright, Lillian Hellman, like Miller, dealt with controversial issues. Both writers focused on rumors and hearsay, mob hysteria, capitalism and relationships. Both writers were extremely intelligent and outspoken. They had an understanding of the world shaped by progressive politics and a Jewish point of view.

Lillian Hellman's first play in 1934 was "The Children's Hour" - a play about two women who were accused of being lesbians by one of their students. The play is about how rumors can become truth. Her goal was to voice her opinion on subjects that most writers were too afraid to touch. In years to come, she would be accused of being a communist largely because of her relationship with Dashiell Hammett This was clearly a case of guilt by association.

When Lillian Hellman was ordered to appear before HUAC, she wrote a letter, in her own voice, after rejecting the version her lawyer wrote. She said in April 1952, "I am most willing to answer all questions about myself. I have nothing to hide from your Committee and there is nothing in my life which I am ashamed of." She did this completely aware that if she did not plead the fifth amendment - which protects us from self incrimination- the Committee could ask her questions about other people.

Lillian Hellman was refusing to name names but would cooperate with the committee if they only wanted to know about her political thinking. She was not going to play by their rules. The letter was rejected. Lillian Hellman was called to testify before the committee. At some point, someone from the press gallery began reading her letter loud enough for the committee to hear. To this day, no one knows who that reporter was.

In her memoir, Scoundrel Time, Lillian Hellman wrote how she wished she had the guts to have said the following to the committee members, "There is no communist menace in this country and you know it. You have made cowards into liars, an ugly business and you made me write a letter in which I acknowledged your power. I should have gone into your committee room given my name and address and walked out." But Lillian Hellman did not say that. It was all too frightening, even for someone of her status.

One of the most famous lines to emerge from the HUAC investigations was "I will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashion." Meaning Lillian Hellman wouldn't do something immoral simply because so many others were acting like cowards.

Writing is expressive, artistic and can be political. Dancers' during the McCarthy era weren't a target for blacklists compared to writers and playwrights who were considered to have a greater influence on the public mind. Writing a play and creating a dance are similar acts. To be a good writer you have to make your words move across the page and glide through the reader's mind. To be a good dancer or choreographer you have to fit each dance sentence together to make a dance piece. Anna Sokolow, my hero, created many dances with bold elegance, dances that told stories and had a clear point of view.

Anna Sokolow was a Jewish modern dancer. She danced, choreographed and taught from the age of 10, and was still working at the age of 90. Most of her dances were expressions of Anna's political and social views For example, one of her dances, titled "A War Trilogy", was a satire that described the beauty of war . She took risks with her movements and her ideas, which is why I find her heroic.

Anna was committed to using dance as a weapon to fight social injustice and to advocate for worker's rights. These ways of thinking and living were her family values passed on by her mother. In the 1920's if you were a woman and a dancer, you were thought to have loose morals. This was not what nice Jewish women did! Nice Jewish women, as all women of the period, were expected to sit home, cook for their husbands, and raise the children. Jewish women didn't dance since it was believed that showing your body in public was disgraceful.

When Anna's mother, Sarah, broke with the traditional role of women, she did so out of necessity. Her husband died at an early age. For Anna, her mother was a role model. Sarah had great energy and spirit. She became a garment worker and a union representative in the international ladies garment workers union. The Sokolow home was observant of most Jewish rituals. Her mother was also a perfectionist with a short temper; a trait she passed on to her children, especially Anna.

As I mentioned earlier, during the 1950's HUAC conducted their witch-hunting for communists in the arts. Anna had been too independent minded to even consider joining any group, which is why she wasn't a suspect, along with the fact that dance flew under the radar. In her own words she said: "I was never a member, you see. What I felt, I felt very personally. It had nothing to do with a doctrine. I must say I believed in what the party could do in principle, yes. Of course later it became shockingly disillusioning..." Anna contributed heavily to making audiences think about sensitive and meaningful issues. She took advantage of her freedom to express.

To me Anna is a hero since she is a person who through determination and strong will-power achieved something of great value. Anna's dances were challenging and disturbing. She possessed values and traits that made her larger than life. Most of her dances expressed freedoms and how easily they can be suppressed. She is my hero because she was rebellious - questioning the status quo and achieving something of true significance. How can one change the world without stepping outside the lines of conformity? It's impossible, which is why Anna was no conformist.

The artists who knew Anna closely had incredible things to say about her. They said her heart was full, that she was uncompromising, that she honored her Jewish background, and she was a good teacher. I interviewed Jim May, an old friend of Anna's, who now runs the Anna Sokolow dance company in New York City. He talked elaborately about Anna. He said "Her true genius was her ability to hold on to what she believed regardless of the outcome. She had artistic integrity. If it was a choice between the paycheck and art she would walk out. She also felt the personal connection to the dance. You must feel the dance to make a dance, you have to go down to the roots and ask your self: why do you want to create this dance?"

In contemporary times artists have grown quiet when they should be louder than ever. The arts, as a whole, have lost their once progressive nature and are losing the opportunity to express meaningful issues through an alternative media.

Still, some individuals in the arts have spoken up to the best of their ability in this suppressed era. For example, Elton John, a singer/song-writer, feels very strongly that the political climate of today is like the McCarthy era, and expressed how he felt in a speech to many other progressive musicians. Another example is the Dixie Chicks, a band of three women who write and sing songs that have beautiful lyrics, not political at all. Ironically when they openly said they were ashamed to be from the same state as George Bush, the media portrayed them as unpatriotic, when all they were doing was using their freedom of speech.

Bill Moyers started a political show called “NOW” on the Public Broadcasting Network or PBS, but his intelligent and critical show was canceled because he was accused by the right of being “biased.” In his own words, “It is our belief that the quality of democracy and the quality of journalism are deeply entwined...” He believes it is the job of a journalist to tell the truth, based on the evidence they find, even if it makes powerful people uncomfortable. I agree with Bill Moyers on his position in this debate.

In conclusion, I believe it is dangerous to let the government dictate what we can and can't talk about, listen to, and read. If this continues to happen, and we don't value our freedom to think independently and speak our minds then eventually we will lose our voice and humanity. Fortunately, I am a member of communities where I am encouraged to say, think, and behave without fear of *being silenced*. However, the world I live in continues to be divided by religion, politics, gender, social class and fear.

I think as people living in a democracy my generation needs to be aware of what is going on and speak out. Not just by literally saying or writing how they feel about our current events but by being the expressive, artistic young people we all are or can be. While doing this paper I have come to realize how ideas like patriotism, freedom of speech and protest have always served to threaten and preserve our fragile democracy. What I have also come to understand is the strong impact that the arts have on the public, the government and individual citizens.

As Anna Sokolow said, if you want to make a dance you have to go to the roots of your being and figure out why a dance must be created. I decided to find a personal connection between my world and dance. Since I have grown up in a post 9/11 world where our leaders impose fear I thought it was important to represent the struggles that we as a democracy face through movement. Please watch this recording of a dance I choreographed and performed based upon the themes of freedom versus oppression and liberty versus control.