PROJECT MUSE®

*Unfriendly Witnesses: Gender, Theater, and Film in the
McCarthy Era* (review)

Andrew Scahil

The Velvet Light Trap, Number 65, Spring 2010, pp. 82-83 (Review)

Published by University of Texas Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/vlt.0.0088>

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/372715>

Unfriendly Witnesses: Gender, Theater, and Film in the McCarthy Era

by Milly S. Barranger

“It is hard to have a witch-hunt without witches,” Ellen Schrecker writes in her book *The Age of McCarthyism*. This insight begins Milly S. Barranger’s new account of the complex web of politics and ideological warfare of the McCarthy period. Unlike other accounts of the period, however, Barranger is primarily interested in the experiences of female witnesses brought before HUAC, dubbed “McCarthy’s women” by the press. As Barranger notes, these seven women—actresses Judy Holliday, Mady Christians, Anne Revere, and Kim Hunter, director Margaret Webster, and writers Lillian Hellman and Dorothy Parker—were simultaneously infantilized and demonized by committee members. Of these McCarthy “witches,” Barranger provocatively asks, “Why did the women arrive in the political cauldron as *unfriendly* witnesses while the male majority, with few exceptions, walked into the corridors of power as cooperative or friendly witnesses?” (xiv).

In the cover artwork for Barranger’s book an inset box features Federal Theatre Project director Hallie Flanagan Davis in an accusatory pose—her finger outstretched and pointed slightly upward, her lips pursed, and her gaze fixed on the off-camera space. Davis’s gesture and gaze direct the viewer to an oversized, unfocused image of Martin Dies, then-chairman of the Special House Committee on Un-American Activities. The David-and-Goliath image bespeaks the book’s central project: uncovering and analyzing the role of female victims of the anti-Communist witch-hunts of the McCarthy era. Through archival research and textual analysis informed by a slight

dose of feminist theory, Barranger tells the story of how seven prominent women of stage and screen attempted—through irony, performance, and outright accusation—to topple the giant that cast its shadow over the entertainment industry.

In her account of Judy Holliday’s blacklisting, Barranger usefully details the vastly hegemonic nature of paranoia, suspicion, and character assassination. Holliday’s exclusion was not limited to the public spectacle of the HUAC hearings or even in FBI documents like *Counterattack: The Newsletter of Facts to Combat Communism*. Indeed, Barranger notes that some of the most damaging attacks came from industry documents like *Red Channels*, a de facto blacklist delivered to advertising executives before shows were cast. Other incendiary accusations came from gossip columnists Hedda Hopper, Louella Parsons, and Jimmy Tarantino, the last of whom elided Holliday’s persona with her celebrated *Born Yesterday* role, stating, “Judy only acts dumb. She’s a smart cookie . . . The Commies got her a long time ago” (qtd. on 14). Indeed, Barranger suggests that Holliday in fact played up her Billie Dawn “dumb blonde” persona during the trials and extraneous interviews, eliding persona and role in order to escape suspicion.

In her section entitled “Death by Innuendo” Barranger examines the career of Mady Christians, who was dubbed “controversial” or “untouchable” (in terms of her hiring) by several publications like *Counterattack*. One of the more interesting revelations in Barranger’s text is the economic industry of smear campaigns—*Counterattack*, for instance, offered to reprint corrections or retractions in its publications for a price,

essentially creating a cottage industry of accusation and blackmail. One difficulty with the book and its structure is that each of the accounts moves in more or less the same narrative: introduction, biography, early accusations, testimony, aftermath, and addendum. By the time the reader reaches Anne Revere, Margaret Webster, and Kim Hunter, however, some variation seems necessary to hold the reader's interest.

Barranger is best when she manages the fiery personalities of Lillian Hellman and Dorothy Parker, whom she dubs "The Defiant Ones." Like the Sidney Poitier/Tony Curtis film she references, both Hellman and Parker were primary targets of the McCarthyism machine for their perception as aggressive and troublesome characters. Indeed, both women were dubbed "key figures" by the FBI, which announced them as suspected active members in the Communist Party. However, despite their vociferous presence, the women still managed to be infantilized by the bureau. In defending his choice to not send Lillian Hellman to jail for not testifying, for instance, HUAC Chairman John Wood explained, "Why cite her for contempt? After all she's a woman." However, I would say that if this is the most dynamic and weighty chapter, it is most likely because these two figures are themselves the most interesting figures that Barranger addresses. This is a problem if only for the fact that (as Barranger notes in several places throughout the chapter) these figures and their battle with HUAC have been well documented and well analyzed by several other prominent scholars in the field. Though the chronicle of Hellman and Parker fits well within the author's framework for examining the "lost" testimony of McCarthy's women, it strains to say something original about these two women in this chapter.

At heart, this is an archivist's text, and the work that Barranger has done compiling this information will no doubt help future scholars in their work understanding and chronicling this frightful period in American history. This is most evident in Barranger's two full appendices, which comprise eighteen pages of her text. The first, "Chronology of Women on the Left," is a comprehensive listing of notable dates and events that have marked the involvement of women in Communist, Labor Party, and antifascist campaigns large and small. The list is indeed weighty, from the 1938 testimony of Hallie Flanagan Davis to the publication of Lillian Hellman's *Scoundrel Time* in 1976. The second appendix is a reprint of selected passages from *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*, dubbed the "Blacklist's Bible" by

producers and employers in the entertainment industry. Notable is the sheer volume and detail of its listings—no less than twenty-one affiliations, memberships, speaking engagements, and sponsorships are available for actress Uta Hagen, for instance—and the manner in which it clearly demarcates the lines of "proper" American citizenship.

To the degree that *Unfriendly Witnesses* performs the task of historical research and detailing untold narratives, it works immensely well. It is an excellent work of archival historiography. As an intervention in other fields, however—film studies, gender studies, star theory, performance studies—the text misses an opportunity to expand its argument beyond this isolated focus. I found the text to be slight on theory overall, and it would have benefited from the incorporation of much of the feminist theory work done on gender and juridical/legal spaces, film studies work on stardom and celebrity, and the excellent body of work in theater and performance studies on identity and public performance. Additionally, many prominent critics who have addressed gender and politics during the cold war period—Elaine Tyler May comes to mind immediately—are curiously absent from Barranger's analysis. Additionally, the book has moments when it seems to lose its critical focus. Prone to hyperbole, it sometimes shifts into something more reminiscent of a tragic/romantic tribute to these artists than a theoretical engagement with the complexity of their political struggle. I mention these related elements as disappointments; however, one benefit of this approach to the subject is that Barranger has created a very student friendly text. Each of the chapters stands alone well as a case study, and I could see myself assigning a chapter as a companion to the very male centered accounts in most film history textbooks.

Overall, *Unfriendly Witnesses* is best assessed on that account—not as a work of theory but as an archival interrogation and an intervention into existing cultural narratives. It is a useful, immensely teachable text that tells a story that has unfortunately been neglected until now in accounts of film history and, indeed, history more broadly. Barranger makes a strong case for analyzing these cases against more celebrated accounts of "masculine" protest and in doing so expands our view of cold war culture, gender, and architecture of power within the period.

Milly S. Barranger. *Unfriendly Witnesses: Gender, Theater, and Film in the McCarthy Era*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2008. 197 pp. \$37.50.