



## **Press Material**

**FINKS** is Joe Gilford's fictionalized account of his parents' actors Jack & Madeline Gilford's struggle with the 1950's blacklist.

**FINKS** had its New York premiere in April 2013 at Ensemble Studio Theatre, where it received critical praise, two Drama Desk nominations for Outstanding Play and Leading Actress, and an Off-Broadway Alliance nomination for Best New Play.

### **About FINKS**

**In the early 1950s**, the Red Scare in this country was in full swing. While Senator Joseph McCarthy exposed so-called subversives in the US government, the congressional counterpart, "HUAC" (the House Un-American Activities Committee) attacked artists in the entertainment industry in Hollywood. HUAC then moved east, its mission "to root out communist subversion in TV and Radio in New York."

**1951: Club comic Mickey Dobbs**, on the verge of starring in his own network TV show, meets actress and activist Natalie Meltzer. Amid the heady activism of the left-wing entertainment world, their romance blossoms—as does the threat of their becoming "blacklisted" because of their political activities. What descends upon them is the absurd and tragic process that victimized actors and entertainers and turned friends and colleagues against each other. Now their circle of friends—Fred, a painter and actor; and Bobby, an ambitious and gifted choreographer—are forced to face the choice of either betraying each other or losing their careers. For some, the blacklist will mean a decade without work. For others, it was simply the end of their careers. And those who willingly testified—named others to the committee—were known by one name which branded them for the rest of their lives, "finks."

**FINKS** was videotaped for Lincoln Center's Theater on Film & Tape archive at the Library of Performing Arts, New York City.

**FINKS** has been produced for radio with the original cast by the Radio Drama Network Foundation and is available for listening on their web site and on public radio stations across the country.

**FINKS** is published by Dramatists Play Service, inc.

*Contact: Abrams Artists Agency, NY (646)486-4600*

### **JOE GILFORD**

Joe has been awarded a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation for his play, *Danny's Brain* about the crisis of football concussions. Other plays include: *The End of Our Rope* and *The Love Museum*. He is the author of the one-act plays *Knockdown*, *Not Tunisia*, *In Aisle 4*, *Settlement*, and *Summer Writers*. His plays have been presented at Ensemble Studio Theatre, Roundabout Theater Co., New York Stage & Film, Todd Mountain Theater Project and the Westbank Downstairs. He is the screenwriter of the feature films *Kalimantan* and *Moonbounce*. He wrote the TV documentaries *Beyond Wiseguys: Italian Americans & the Movies* and *The Great American Songbook*, both broadcast on PBS.

Joe was born and raised in Greenwich Village. His parents Jack and Madeline Gilford were actors and progressive activists. He earned his BFA at the NYU Film & TV program where he has taught screenwriting since 1999. He is a long-time member of Ensemble Studio Theatre and its Playwrights Unit.

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# The New York Times

CRITICS' PICKS

THEATER REVIEW

## A Choice to Name Names, or Else 'Finks,' at the Ensemble Studio Theater



From left, Aaron Serotsky, Ned Eisenberg and Miriam Silverman in Joe Gilford's play, "Finks," inspired by his parents.

**By NEIL GENZLINGER**

**Published: April 8, 2013**

There is only one female character in "[Finks](#)," a bracing play about McCarthyism by Joe Gilford, but it's the kind of role actresses live for, and Miriam Silverman is giving it an attention-getting turn at the [Ensemble Studio Theater](#). The play works subject matter that has already been pretty thoroughly mined, but this brisk, muscular production — based on the lives of the playwright's parents — quickly leaves you not caring that you've visited the territory before.

Ms. Silverman is Natalie, a firebrand who at the dawn of the McCarthy era organizes one fund-raiser after another for causes that some would call progressive, but others view as fronts for Communism.

Natalie is as passionate about sex as she is about social and political issues, and as the play opens, she sets her sights on Mickey, a nightclub comic who is happy to be the object of her attention but is agnostic when it comes to her commitments. He is, however, willing to joke about them.

“Red Buttons is so paranoid he changed his name to blue,” he says during a stand-up routine.

As the story progresses, Mickey perhaps stays naïve a little too long, but Aaron Serotsky is terrific in the role, suave and insecure at the same time. He also nicely walks a personal tightrope that Mr. Gilford has strung for Mickey, being head over heels for Natalie yet bristling at her efforts to drag him into her campaigns.

“I want to be with you,” he tells her angrily, “but not on a leash.”

Giovanna Sardelli, the director, deftly switches the action among locations that include Cafe Society, a famed Greenwich Village nightclub, and a hearing room where the House Un-American Activities Committee pressures assorted entertainment figures to name names.

Natalie presses ahead with her advocacy as if she were immune to the gathering storm, but of course she isn't, and neither is Mickey, who finds that love also brings a sort of guilt by association. They and their friends, including a gay dancer named Bobby (Leo Ash Evens, whose character is presumably a stand-in for Jerome Robbins), all must choose whether to protect their careers or their friends, and how to stay true to their principles.

“I don't know if I can do this for much longer,” Natalie confides to Bobby at one point, trying to decide whether her stand is worth becoming unemployable. “It never occurred to me that I might want a little success.”

Mr. Gilford isn't interested in presenting the government investigators as anything more than the caricatures we know and hate from old footage of the hearings, and perhaps their self-serving bullying had no other dimension. In any case, his view is

understandable: The play was inspired by the real-life experiences of his parents, Jack and Madeline Lee Gilford, actors who were blacklisted.

The script is a heady mix of imagined characters and real-life ones, or references to them. Elia Kazan, Budd Schulberg, Zero Mostel and others are name-checked, and some period tunes like “Sing Me a Song of Social Significance” turn up.

The closed-in feel of the theater space works to the play’s advantage, lending a claustrophobic element that conjures what those caught up in the blacklist must have felt: the walls closing in, the world scrutinizing them from close range. The play sometimes turns too didactic, especially near the end, as Mr. Gilford has characters make here’s-the-point statements that aren’t necessary. By late in this fine production, these able actors have made the playwright’s messages perfectly clear.

### **Finks**

By Joe Gilford; directed by Giovanna Sardelli; choreography by Greg Graham; sets by Jason Simms; costumes by Sydney Maresca; lighting by Gina Scherr; sound by Jill B C Du Boff; production stage manager, Jillian M. Anderson and Robert Signom III; general manager, Nicholas Ward. Presented by Ensemble Studio Theater, William Carden, artistic director; Paul A. Slee, executive director. At the Ensemble Studio Theater, 549 West 52nd Street, Clinton; (866) 811-4111, [ovationtix.com](http://ovationtix.com). Through April 21. Running time: 2 hours 15 minutes.

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# The New York Times

## Blacklisted, From a Child's View



Jack and Madeline Gilford in 1949.

**By JOE GILFORD**

**Published: April 24, 2013**

Among the few things I share with Eugene O'Neill — although I am not nearly as brilliant or as important — is that we are both playwrights, we both chose to write about our parents, and our parents were actors. One thing we don't share is that my parents were blacklisted in the 1950s and were unable to work in television and film for almost a decade.

My parents were [Jack Gilford](#) and Madeline Lee Gilford. He became well-known for his [TV commercials for Cracker Jack](#) and for Broadway roles in “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum” and “Cabaret,” both of which earned him Tony

nominations. She was a child actress and then a homemaker, raising three children, and later a casting director and producer.



Miriam Silverman and Aaron Serotsky as the parents in "Finks," now playing at Ensemble Studio Theater.

Their experiences with the blacklist drove me to write "[Finks](#)," named for those who informed to the House Un-American Activities Committee. It is playing through May 5 at Ensemble Studio Theater. The cast has eight actors, who take on 15 roles, including actual figures like the director Elia Kazan and the actor Lee J. Cobb. While I fictionalized my parents' characters, I used actual Congressional testimony and public statements for some of their real-life counterparts.

One character is based on the choreographer Jerome Robbins. Although many of the events depicted in the play are factual — he was a friend of my mother's, she did teach him the Lindy dance, and he did name her and seven others to the committee — I chose to use fiction to build the drama of the play.



Jack and Madeline Gilford in 1963 with their children: Lisa, Sam, front, and Joe. Joe Gilford has a play, "Finks," inspired by his parents' blacklist experience.

During the years in which my parents were blacklisted (roughly 1954 to 1962) all three of us Gilford kids attended the Little Red School House, one of the most progressive elementary schools in Manhattan. My father wasn't especially well known yet; my parents were just working people. Finding work, achieving success, raising three kids and keeping a marriage intact are, for any family, enough of a struggle. And living with actors — well, it's dramatic in ways that most other families don't experience. Just the process

of learning lines for a new show was a family project.

But when you have the federal government breathing down your neck for nothing more than your progressive political beliefs, it gets dramatic in an entirely different way.

The joke in our family was that our first three words were "Mama ... Papa ... Fifth Amendment."

Being served a subpoena for testimony before the Un-American Activities Committee was a fearful moment in my parents' lives and in all of their colleagues'. The law said that you had to answer to your full name and then be physically touched by the paper subpoena itself. Many avoided service by leaving town. But if you had jobs and kids to send to school, that wasn't an option.

In the summer, Fire Island was a colony of lefties and show folk. It was still affordable for working people too — a beach paradise where you gave up shoes for three months and stayed in a swimsuit right up until dinner time. Subpoena servers weren't known to venture out that far and would certainly have stood out in their business suits and black leather shoes.

I am blessed — maybe cursed — with an amazing long-term memory. One of the earliest memories, and certainly most shocking, took place at the entrance to our rented cottage one summer afternoon. My mother was returning from the market, hauling groceries in the traditional red wagon, my brother only about a year old, swaddled in her arms. There behind a bush, she spotted two heavy leather shoes. And then in a moment, revealing herself, was Dolores Scotti, a reactionary actress earning extra money as a subpoena server.

“Madeline Lee Gilford!” Scotti called out. My mother was alert enough not to answer. When Scotti approached to touch her with the subpoena, her only defense was my little brother, Sam. Wielding the infant like a shield, my mother dueled with Scotti, dodging and weaving, blocking her with my brother so it was impossible for Scotti to touch her with the subpoena.

In a few moments, my mother's screams alerted all the surrounding neighbors. Now there was a mob, and Scotti had to flee. She was literally chased to the dock and had to hop the next ferry home.

Inevitably, my mother accepted the service and testified, but her radio and TV career was effectively ended. My father was able to work on Broadway, but he was not able to jump back into TV and films again until the early 1960s.

In “Finks,” the character based upon my father struggles to balance his budding career with the pressure of having to name names, which would destroy his marriage and his friendships. My real-life father never had any doubts about what he would do. But the play mirrors the cases of other families caught up in the blacklist.

This month a group of us “red-diaper babies” participated in a talk back after a performance. They included [Kate Lardner](#), daughter of the blacklisted screenwriter Ring Lardner Jr.; Josh Mostel, son of the actor Zero Mostel; and [Julie Garfield](#), daughter of the actor John Garfield. Lee Grant, the actor and director who survived the blacklist and went on to win an Oscar for “[Shampoo](#),” was there too — living proof of the resilience of people with the kind of courage our parents had.

We all recalled clearly a dark and fearful time — a decade, even two, spent scrambling to survive rather than acting or creating plays, television and movies. The pain and loss were a complete waste. Totally unnecessary.

“We’ve all been forced to do things, say things, be things we have no business being,” one character in “Finks” says near the end. “Heroism is for heroes, not us.”

*Joe Gilford is a playwright and screenwriter. He lives in Brooklyn.*

A version of this article appeared in print on April 28, 2013, on page AR6 of the New York edition with the headline: Blacklisted, From a Child’s View

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**Time Out rating:** ★★★★★

Mon Apr 8 2013

**Theater review by Diane Snyder. Ensemble Studio Theatre (see Off Broadway). By Joe Gilford. Dir. Giovanna Sardelli. With ensemble cast. 2hrs 10mins. One intermission.**

## **Time Out says:**

Forget blue jokes; the humor in *Finks*, Joe Gilford's farsighted yet tender tribute to his blacklisted parents, is distinctly red, and a surprising element in a play based on the struggles of actors Jack Gilford and Madeline Lee, whose lives were upended when the House Un-American Activities Committee went on its witch hunt for communist sympathizers in the 1950s and they didn't trade names. But it's part of what makes this play, directed with vitality by Giovanna Sardelli, a nifty bit of theater.

Using a mixture of historical and invented characters, Gilford contrasts scenes inspired by his parents' lives and his father's stand-up routines with ones based on the actual testimony of finkers such as Elia Kazan (Jason Liebman) and Lee J. Cobb (Thomas Lyons). For example, fictional activist Natalie Meltzer (Miriam Silverman) brings Mickey Dobbs (Aaron Serotsky) into her fold, even getting him to perform an Abbott and Costello-style Red Scare routine. Although he shares her beliefs, Mickey professes to be apolitical, but he's the first to recognize the threat from outside and within their circle, which includes Bobby Gerard (Leo Ash Evans), a choreographer based on HUAC informer Jerome Robbins.

The eight-person ensemble is uniformly strong, especially Serotsky, who beautifully shifts from light-to heavy-hearted as the fallout leaves him questioning his actions, and Ned Eisenberg as a fiery colleague completely destroyed. At times the proceedings get too diffusive, and the dialogue overly expository, but the production keeps coming back into focus as Gilford tries to understand why some of the accused betrayed friends to keep their livelihoods. In that, he demonstrates a pluck similar to that of his parents.—*Diane Snyder*

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# Joe Gilford's 'Finks,' about the dark days of Hollywood blacklisting, is personal

By FRANK SCHECK

April 8, 2013

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## THEATER REVIEW

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### FINKS

Ensemble Studio Theatre, 549 W. 52nd St.; 866-811-4111. Through April 21. Running time: 140 minutes, one intermission.



'Finks' feels personal. And with good reason: This drama about Jack and Madeline Lee Gilford's struggles during the show-business blacklist of the '50s was written by their son Joe Gilford. His historical drama is rife with family pride — you may know his father's genial face from old Cracker Jack commercials — and while the names have been changed to protect the innocent, the passions are real.

The key characters are nightclub comic Mickey (Aaron Serotsky) and Natalie (Miriam Silverman), a radio/television actress who's also a political firebrand. Though she's married when they meet, they quickly begin an intense romance.



Miriam Silverman and Aaron Serotsky are caught up in the blacklisting of actors as communists during the 1950s in "Finks."

"She's Emma Goldman trapped in the body of Paulette Goddard," Mickey tells his comedian friend, Fred (Ned Eisenberg).

But their happiness is interrupted by the growing fear fostered by the House Un-American Activities Committee, investigating communist ties in show business. Those who refuse to furnish names find themselves without jobs or sent to jail.

Those who do talk — the "finks" of the title — include "On the Waterfront" director Elia Kazan, screenwriter Budd Schulberg and actor Lee J. Cobb, shown testifying before the

committee's menacing chairman (Michael Cullen). There's also a gay dancer/choreographer (Leo Ash Evens), who bears a strong resemblance to Jerome Robbins.

When Fred is called to testify, the rebellious comic invokes the First Amendment, rather than the Fifth, even though it means imprisonment.

"I didn't fight in Okinawa to let them run my life or tell me how to vote," he tells friends.

Inevitably the noose tightens around both Mickey and Natalie. (She loses her job when the soap-opera character she's playing is suddenly killed off.) Their testimonies before the committee make up the play's tense climax.

Granted, the playwright's too close to his subjects — he spends more time on their courtship than necessary — and Serotsky isn't quite seasoned enough a comic to carry off Mickey's stand-up shticks. But the deliciously wry Silverman seems to have stepped straight out of the '50s, and, under Giovanna Sardelli's skillful direction, Thomas Lyons and Jason Liebman nimbly handle a wide range of supporting characters. Sydney Maresca's costumes beautifully evoke a period young theatergoers may not know existed.

For them, "Finks" will be more than a son's loving tribute to his courageous parents; it's also a valuable history lesson.

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# THE HUFFINGTON POST



**David Finkle** Writer, Drama Critic

When the red-baiting scourge was intensifying in the 1950s, rising comic Jack Gilford and his chorine girlfriend-then-wife Madeline Lee Gilford were caught up in it. Madeline, more than Jack, was ferociously busy in various groups the House Un-American Activities Committee and Red Channels were scrutinizing as Communist hotbeds. As a predictable result, the Gilfords were pursued.

At that time their son Joe Gilford was born. As he was growing up with both parents black-list-implicated, the shameful times were what he heard regularly and heatedly discussed. The talk had to have been about the scarcity of work for anyone with a Red Channels listing or fellow traveler designation. He knew about family friends called in for HUAC grilling where some excoriated the committee to their eventual detriment, some took shelter under the Fifth Amendment and some named names.

So perhaps it's no surprise that when writing a play about what he knows, Gilford has come up with the impassioned, autobiographical *Finks* at the Ensemble Studio Theatre and first produced in 2008 by the New York Stage and Film Company. In it, his parents are Mickey Dobbs (Aaron Serotsky) and Natalie (Miriam Silverman). Mickey is doing so well in his gigs at Barney Josephson's Café Society that he lands a television series suddenly thrown into doubt over his supposed political affiliations. Natalie doesn't quite understand why the husband she loves is more reticent than she about publicly proclaiming their beliefs in artistic freedom -- and in all threatened freedoms -- no matter the consequences.

Constructing his play intricately, such that the Dobbs home and Café Society scenes are intertwined with HUAC interviews conducted by Representative Walters (Michael Cullen), Gilford also prominently includes close friends Fred Lang (Ned Eisenberg), who's modeled at least in part on Philip Loeb, and Bobby (Leo Ash Evens), who's clearly modeled after Jerome Robbins and who does a hot Lindy with Miriam (choreographed by Greg Graham). (Bobby is also glimpsed rehearsing other signature Robbins moves.) Among names-namers depicted whose identities aren't veiled is Elia Kazan.

It's hard to think that the fervor with which Gilford writes -- as well as the humor innate to both Mickey and Miriam that's frequently expressed -- hasn't been blended into his DNA. The work -- directed with concomitant fervor by Giovanna Sardelli and dressed with period accuracy by Sydney Maresca -- is a testament to the parents who managed to maintain their indomitable spirit throughout the ordeal.

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THEATERMANIA.COM PRESENTS  
The 58th Annual  
**Drama Desk Awards**

**Outstanding Play**

Annie Baker, *The Flick*

Christopher Durang, *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*

**Joe Gilford, *Finks***

Richard Greenberg, *The Assembled Parties*

Amy Herzog, *Belleville*

Deanna Jent, *Falling*

Richard Nelson, *Sorry*

**Outstanding Actress in a Play**

Maria Dizzia, *Belleville*

Amy Morton, *Edward Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Julia Murney, *Falling*

Vanessa Redgrave, *The Revisionist*

**Miriam Silverman, *Finks***

Cicely Tyson, *The Trip to Bountiful*



**BEST NEW PLAY**

**Nominees:**

- *Cock*
- *Disgraced*
- ***Finks***
- *My Name is Asher Lev*
- *Vanya and Sonia and Masha and Spike*