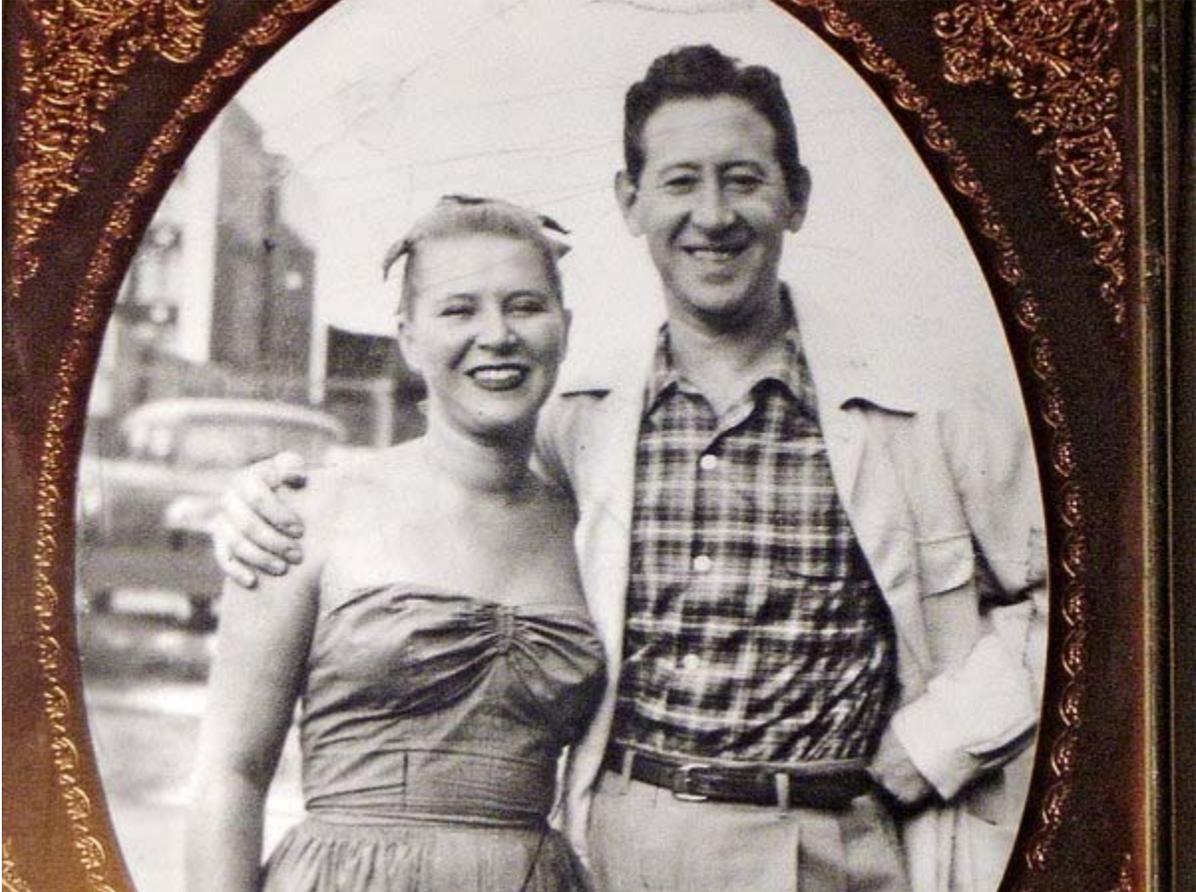


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Blacklisted, From a Child's View



Jack and Madeline Gilford in 1949.

By JOE GILFORD

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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.

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