

'Is this Christopher Marlowe a Communist?'

Only Victims

A Study
of Show Business
Blacklisting.

By Robert Vaughn.
Putnam. 355 pp. \$7.95

Reviewed by
JON R. WALTZ

Mr. Starnes: You are quoting from this Marlowe. Is he a Communist?

Mrs. Flanagan: I am very sorry. I was quoting from Christopher Marlowe.

Mr. Starnes: Tell us who Mar-

lowe is, so we can get the proper reference...

Mrs. Flanagan: Put in the record that he was the greatest dramatist in the period of Shakespeare, immediately preceding Shakespeare.

Mr. Starnes: Of course, we had what some people call Communists back in the days of the Greek theater.

Mrs. Flanagan: Quite true.

Mr. Starnes: And I believe Mr. Euripides was guilty of teaching class consciousness also, wasn't he?

Mrs. Flanagan: I believe that was alleged against all of the Greek dramatists.

Mr. Starnes: So we cannot say when it began.

The time of this grotesque exchange was the summer of 1938. Mrs. Hallie Flanagan was the National Director of the WPA project known as the Federal Theater. Joseph Starnes, Democrat of Alabama, was one of the most vocal members of the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The Committee was engaged in what was billed as an "Investigation of Un-American Propaganda." Starnes and the Committee's chairman, Martin Dies, believed that almost "every single play" produced by the Federal Theater contained "propaganda for communism or the New Deal."

One of the prime offenders was a children's play entitled *The Revolt of the Beavers*, although the Committee did not make clear which of the two political movements the insurgent beavers were touting.

Any book that has available to it data and recorded testimony of this sort ought to be fascinating, and this one is, so long as its author sticks to quoting transcript.

Only Victims, which began life as a Ph.D. thesis and too often reads like one, is a chronicle of the Un-American Activities Committee's five investigations of the entertainment world. There was Dies's investigation of the Federal Theater,



Rep. Richard M. Nixon, chief investigator Robert Stripling, and J. Parnell Thomas, chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1948

which killed it. There was J. Parnell Thomas's 1947 investigation of Communist infiltration of the motion picture industry, during which Jack Warner and Robert Taylor groveled and informed; Rep. Richard Nixon asked no questions of witness Ronald Reagan; Adolphe Menjou described how the reading of 150 books on "the oriental tyranny, [the] Kremlin-dominated conspiracy" had equipped him to spot colleagues who acted "an awful lot like Communists"; and such members of the recalcitrant "Hollywood 10" as Dalton Trumbo lost their livelihood.

Then there was the marathon 1951-52 examination of the entertainment industry. During this investigation, conducted at the height of the Joseph McCarthy era, witnesses unfriendly to the Committee—Morris Carnovsky, Howard Da Silva, Will Geer, Larry Parks, Gale Sondergaard—learned what a blacklist is; Sterling Hayden, a friendly witness, "was the first of many who elected to put the continuance of their careers ahead of personal and professional friendships"; and Edward G. Robinson, humble beyond the point of embarrassment, told a Committee member, "Believe me, . . . when you said that you didn't believe I was a Communist, it made me feel good."

When Red-baiter Harold Velde took over the Committee in the mid-Fifties it had about run out of big names to summon for the sake of publicity. The highlight of Velde's hearings was the sight of band-leader Artie Shaw weeping with remorse for having been "duped" by the Communists. In June, 1958, after a loud but fruitless confrontation with singer Paul Robeson, the Committee closed down its 20-year investigation of communism in the world of greasepaint without recommending a single significant item of legislation.

The author of *Only Victims*

Jon R. Waltz is professor of law at Northwestern University School of Law.

knows something about the entertainment business and his interest in intrigue comes naturally. Robert Vaughn had a long run as superspy Napoleon Solo in the television serial *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* Unfortunately, he does not know as much about political science, law, or the legislative process. This ignorance results in some less than penetrating observations. For example, Vaughn, omitting only cannibalism, advises that "The American public has, with justification, viewed Com-

munism, Fascism, Nazism and anarchism as alien to our democratic traditions." But Vaughn's unsureness is most evident in the opinion with which he concludes his book. He says that "drastic changes" in American drama before and after World War II were "a definite probable result of the Committee's efforts." Still, Vaughn's book, read for its quotes and not its commentary, is a sometimes chilling reminder of a chapter in our history straight out of Kafka. □