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Rev. of "McCarthy," play by Jeff Goldsmith with James Pickering as Sen. Joseph McCarthy

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fills us with a mixture of outrage, pity, and deep moral unease. Through David Hurst's impeccable performance, Incommunicado manages, effortlessly, to leap the inevitable first hurdle of making a difficult and hugely self-possessed genius a credible and even sympathetic human being. Hurst plays Pound with lethal charm and dilapidated elegance, and through his performance we come to believe in "old Ez" as a man whose whole life is in his art, whose "job," as he says in the play, is "imagining. It's what I do ...." He is perfectly at home in the magnificence of his own mind, composing whole cantos in his head and convincing us that the creation of poetry is a pastime of pure joy, freedom, and power, even as he lives like an animal whose only daily human contact is with his keeper, a black M.P., played by Anthony Chisholm.

Although it might appear that the M.P. has been inserted by Dulack into his play to serve as objec-
tified "other" of Pound's racist crimes, it is through the growing friendship between the poet and the soldier that the full horror of Pound's moral cowardice is exposed. During the course of long conversations, demanded by the play's self-imposed conditions of silence and solitary confinement, Pound is at least able to see his kinship with a poor, uneducated black man who has also been debased and disenfranchised by a "civilized" so-
ciety. He even comes to commiserate with the Jews themselves who have been forced, as he has, to wander the world in search of a spiritual home-
land. But this flair for self-dramatizing pathos blinds him to the much uglier irony that his preach-
ing the gospel of culture and human salvation has actually led him to sanction such abominations as racial persecution. His cage of silence represents the apotheosis of his moral isolation from human-
ity and symbolizes the profound hypocrisy of his life as a self-proclaimed prophet of enlightenment.

Pound refuses to see the consequences of his racist rantings, and when he is shown newspaper accounts of the death camps and the ovens, he can only cower in confusion: "That has nothing to do with me!" He asks where he was to have gotten "moral guidance" in America in 1945 on the "ques-
tion" of the Jews. This pathetic pleading for moral guidance from a man whose whole life was learn-
ing, art, and culture lifts the play above the level of a public inquest into one man's moral crimes against humanity. Through Pound's refusal even to acknowledge his complicity in those crimes, Dulack raises disturbing questions about the ease with which society, even today, can ignore or excuse its own moral apathy when equally horrifying sins are committed against humanity every day. The final tableau of the production leaves Pound a moral cipher. He sits alone in his cage in his filthy prison nightshirt, a stark mirror image of the very horror he has sanctioned, while his racist slurs spew out of the theater's loudspeakers and wash over the audience.

Incommnunicado is a powerful work by a maturing voice in the American theater. The production is uniformly strong, directed with great intelligence, and very solidly acted. The crude and simple set, designed by recent Soviet emigre and Refusenik, Andrei Effremoff, fits snugly into the tiny Wilma stage and captures the dank, sewer-like atmos-
phere of Pound's solitary confinement. The es-
teemable achievement of this collaboration of the Fund for New American Plays, the Wilma Theatre, and Dulack gives eloquent testimony that the U.S. can, and must, support not only exciting new drama but brave and daring new theater as well.

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Milwaukee seems an appropriate venue for stag-
ing McCarthy by Jeff Goldsmith since its title char-
acter is a prominent figure in Wisconsin political folklore. The play premiered at the Odyssey Theatre in Los Angeles in 1989 and enjoyed a six-
month run there. The director of that production, Frank Condon, also staged the Milwaukee pro-
duction using local resources for documentation in the production. Dramaturg Rob Meiksins could thus claim that the production here had a more “Wisconsin” flavor to it. That Wisconsin produced Joseph McCarthy remains a subject of profound curiosity among local audiences, and here Mc-
carthy is somewhat analogous to Huey Long in Louisiana, Warren G. Harding in Ohio, or Harry Byrd in Virginia.

The play’s main focus, however, is not Mc-
carthy’s Wisconsin roots but the free-for-all that was American politics after World War II. Play-
wright Goldsmith has created a vast tapestry with numerous characters—the play has at least forty
(Photo: Mark Avery)
with character names, and many others who walk on and off the stage anonymously. He successfully portrays the charged atmosphere in which McCarthy's mature political character took shape and his demagoguery could thrive. Goldsmith's play depicts a world in which the budding careers of Richard Nixon, Lyndon Johnson, John F. Kennedy, and other young men were beginning to eclipse the "old guard" of Taft, Tydings, and Hicklenlooper.

The Milwaukee Repertory Theatre production presented American politics as a kind of boxing ring. Functional office chairs served frequently in upstage areas as seats for ringside observers (often U.S. Senators); the chairs also served to portray at various times the chambers of the Senate, offices of the Pentagon, meeting halls, and Capitol hearing rooms where McCarthy did his bloodiest punching. The production concentrated on the Senate's rapid degeneration after World War II from a genteel men's club to the back room of a sleazy tavern. Ultimately the play shows how far the bully boys got in American society at large. It demonstrates that "McCarthyism" was not a primitive attack on liberalism, but instead an outbreak of paranoia, similar to what happens in a saloon brawl when everyone makes a mad dash to the nearest exit. It was a fight for survival against foes which McCarthy and others in government had conjured up to serve their own narrow political ends.

Director Condon's rapidly-paced production had a strong documentary feel, clearly indebted to Piscator's productions of Kipphardt and Hochhuth at the Berlin Freie Volksbühne in the early 1960s. Michael Devine's scene design consisted of levels painted in gray, set with tables and chairs also in gray. Much of the visual material was in black and white and the result was a sense of historical inevitability. The overall style of the production was stark and grainy with lighting by Doc Ballard that was intense and seemingly monochromatic. Sam Fleming's costumes likewise captured the period with an insistence upon grayness, sparked here and there by flashes of muted color.

The centerpiece of the entire production, however, was the performance of James Pickering as McCarthy. It was obvious that Pickering had studied the monotonous vocal inflections of McCarthy and at the same time had worked to bring the Senator's banality to the point of theatrical effectiveness. Pickering moved much more quickly than McCarthy ever did, but when it came to public pronouncements, Pickering slowed the pace down and allowed audiences to catch momentary glimpses of a treacherous vulgarian whose first priority was drawing blood from his opponents. Pickering also brought a great deal of humor to the character and audiences found themselves laughing at the spectacle of a man whose venality could wreak so much havoc and damage. That could only happen in a political system that was rapidly becoming a media circus. Pickering's McCarthy was a comedian with a studied mean streak, and he provided more side-show antics than anyone anticipated. His performance illuminated a hitherto unrecognized fact about Joseph McCarthy, namely that he established a precedent for media-styled demagoguery characterizing American politics in succeeding decades. The play as a whole asserts that McCarthy did more than that; he set the standard to which later American politicians could aspire.

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