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

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**McCARTHY.** By Jeff Goldsmith. Milwaukee Repertory Theatre. 11 January 1990.

Milwaukee seems an appropriate venue for staging *McCarthy* by Jeff Goldsmith since its title character 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 production 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 McCarthy 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 McCarthy's Wisconsin roots but the free-for-all that was American politics after World War II. Playwright Goldsmith has created a vast tapestry with numerous characters—the play has at least forty



James Pickering, in *McCarthy*, by Jeff Goldsmith. Milwaukee Repertory Theatre.  
(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 Hickel.

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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