

## A Shadow Over the Town

Working in television during  
the blacklist was no sanctuary

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**After being blacklisted, Al Levitt lost his promising film career and struggled to write for television.**

*Communist actors, announcers, directors, writers, producers, etc., whether in radio, theatre or movies, should all be barred to the extent permissible by law and union contracts.*

*--Counterattack, September 1947*

**W**riters are known for their imaginations. Imagine this: You're living in a time when talking to a friend could cost you your job. You face the possibility of never working as a writer again because someone claimed you once attended a political meeting. At any moment, you could be faced with an untenable Hobson's choice: either you go to jail, lose your livelihood, or you rat on your friends or colleagues. No matter which you choose, your life will never be the same. Jean-Paul Sartre's *No Exit* sounds like your way of life. No, this isn't Germany under the Nazis, or Afghanistan last year. It's the clean-cut, white-bread 1950s in the good old U.S. of A., and it's the era of Blacklist.

It all happened at the end of the last popular war before now, World War II, when, presumably, the whole country was united in its determination to wipe out fascism. The war followed on the heels of the Great Depression, when much of the country was financially devastated. Communism, with its apparent share-and-share-alike philosophy, appealed to many people as a possible answer for the country's woes.

But by the end of the war, Communism had become the new foe, and those who dallied with its principles were suspected of attempting to undermine the American way of life.

### **Names, Names, Names**

*With television going into its third big year, come this Fall, the entire industry is becoming increasingly aware of the necessity to plug all Commie propaganda loopholes. Network and station heads, with a tremendous financial stake, want no part of Commie or pinkos.*

*--Ed Sullivan, 1950*

In 1947, when the House Committee on Un-American Activities, familiarly known as HUAC or the Committee, held its first hearings about Communism and the entertainment industry, network television was in the womb. By the mid-1950s, when the Blacklist was in full force, the fledgling television had become wildly popular, not unlike the Internet today.

Television ate up ideas at an astonishing pace. The three major networks were desperate for scripts, for performers, for directors to fill those precious viewing hours. And yet, the cloud grumbled overhead.

"From my point of view," said Del Reisman, WGAw Past President who worked as a story editor for both NBC and CBS in the 1950s, "which was really from the outside looking in, the Blacklist was not a list; the Blacklist was many lists. Each of the three networks at that time had their own list. The studios used their own lists, culled from private organizations that produced magazines such as *Red Channels*, *Alert* and so on."

For Reisman, a young man in on the breathless beginning of a new medium, the era of the Blacklist tainted everything.

"It really was a scary time," he said, "because you didn't know when it would land on people you were talking to. Would I, as a story editor talking to a writer later named by someone, be questioned? Because what was I doing talking to that person? It's not very realistic; it's not very practical. But that's how that atmosphere of fear hovered over the town.

"I remember many, many conversations, one with an old friend who actually had been a movie columnist for the old *Los Angeles Daily News*, which was a tabloid-sized paper published downtown, what we'd call an alternative newspaper now, a liberal, left newspaper. He wrote a very literate movie column, a lot of gossip, but news also. He was named in testimony in Washington as, I think, a member of the Communist Party. In any event, he was out. He was fired. He had a family, and he was working at anything he could do. One day -- this is a true story -- he got a job on Sundays at Forest Lawn in the grave-digging crew, which was okay with him. He was a healthy guy, a youngish guy. He was fired from that, because [Forest Lawn] found out that he had been named. Couldn't get a job with a shovel."

But Reisman didn't just see the Blacklist atmosphere from a distance. It infected his work, his day-to-day existence, and his relationships. It was like a fog enveloping everything and everybody.

"I went to work at CBS on a very prestigious assignment called *Playhouse 90*," Reisman said. "I was a story editor. I would get memos from the network's business affairs office, saying: 'The following writers are not available during this period of time.' It would be six weeks or two months or something. And you'd have a list of 10, 12 names -- the name of a writer and then a little explanation. 'Not available until Sept. 9' or 'Working out of the country' or something like that. And it looked perfectly reasonable and legitimate to me.

"I'd look at that list of names and I'd think, 'Oh, this is bad.' I wanted to call a couple of these people, 'cause I had a story in mind and I wanted to get one of those people in. After this happened three or four times, I began to put it together in my mind.



**[My front] kept cutting my share lower and lower on the premise that, as he said, 'You know, you sit in front of a typewriter all day. I've got to go to these goddamned conferences. They ask me something--I don't know what the hell the answer is. It's very tense,' he said, 'and so you're getting--.' He had me down to where I was getting a third or something like that, or a quarter.**



**Al Levitt**

"So I finally said, 'Wait a minute. *Not available*. What does that really mean?' And then I ran into a writer, and I said, 'I had an idea that I know [producer] Martin Manulus would approve and you would have been the perfect writer for it, but we had to move to somebody else, because you weren't available.'

"This guy said to me: 'What do you mean I wasn't available? I've been available for months.'

"He said, 'I think I'm blacklisted.'

"He didn't know."

### **On the Inside of the Blacklist**

As scary as it was for the average television story editor, life was even more precarious for those writers directly hit by the Blacklist, some of whom had flourishing careers in film before their lives were brought low, and others who saw promising television careers suddenly cut short. A few left the country; others turned to other work. And some tried to continue making a living as writers, making up pseudonyms or working with fronts in the untested medium of television.

Joan Scott became a television writer under a pseudonym, as well as becoming the front for both herself and her blacklisted husband Adrian Scott, one of the Hollywood Ten.

"Somebody heard that the story editor for *Lassie* wanted material and would work with blacklisted people if they used pen names," she said. "I think he came to our house with this huge, beautiful *Lassie* of his own. He and Adrian were talking about story ideas. Everything Adrian would suggest, he would say, 'No, because we've already done that.' Finally, I said, 'Have you ever done *Cry Wolf*?' Immediately, they both sprang to attention. The story editor said, 'Oh, that's a great idea!' Adrian said, quickly, '*She* does it.'

"I'd never written professionally, so the story editor was a little bit doubtful, so Adrian said, 'I will guarantee the script.'

"That was my first television assignment.

"I'd been called before the Committee under my maiden name, so we were afraid to have me go as Joan Scott, for fear somebody would put that together with Adrian, and I couldn't use my maiden name, so we made up a name and that became my pen name: Joanne Court.

"I did the script for *Lassie* and went in for story conferences. Fortunately, nobody knew me or put the name together in any way, because I had two problems. One was my own name and the other was being married to Adrian. It was a real double whammy.

"After that, I got another *Lassie* assignment, and then Adrian got a couple. We must have done a dozen between us in '55-'56.



**Helen Levitt became a writer when her husband was blacklisted.**

"He did make up a couple [of] names, and then also used my pen name. The problem became story conferences in the studios. That was the scary part, because he couldn't go in. He would have been recognized. I didn't think anyone was going to recognize me, and it almost never happened. A lot of the blacklisted writers would go into a studio and somebody would pop up knowing them under their real name, which was nerve-wracking for everyone."

Al and Helen Levitt worked a similar subterfuge, writing under the pen names of Tom and Helen August.

"I would never probably have become a writer if not for the blacklist," said the late Helen Levitt in a UCLA oral history interview with Blacklist expert Larry Ceplair. "I would have done something; I don't know what. But why [Al] asked me to collaborate with him I don't know. I guess it was because he liked the idea. And I didn't mind the idea, and it really worked out very well. Because I just learned to do everything that was hard for him, to make it easy for him."

"On the very first show we were on, *The Donna Reed Show*, certainly [the fact that Levitt was blacklisted] was considered, but people who really were in charge mostly knew who he was but didn't admit it. Elaborate games were played. But people were afraid to give him a job."

Initially, though, Al Levitt had been part of an informal black market using fronts, people who acted as the name on the script and the face at story conferences. Where he made \$10-20,000 per year before the Blacklist, the couple cleared perhaps \$5,000 per year after. He and Helen were dependent on their front.

"Al was one of the first into the black market," said Helen Levitt. "I mean, people came to him almost immediately. He was working on *Colgate Comedy Hour* for a front who approached him. And it was such an unpleasant relationship; he was so badly exploited by this guy. The guy was such a callous, greedy man."

Al Levitt continued the story for the oral history project: "And then, as the show became more successful, the more successful it became, the more he resented me. He kept cutting my share lower and lower on the premise that, as he said, 'You know, you sit in front of a typewriter all day. I've got to go to these goddamned conferences. They ask me something -- I don't know what the hell the answer is. It's very tense,' he said, 'and so you're getting \_\_\_\_\_'" He had me down to where I was getting a third or something like that, or a quarter."

Levitt's second fronting experience, with Jerry Davis, was much more pleasant, although it still had demeaning moments.

"One day [Jerome L. Davis] turned up at my [photography] studio. And he said, 'Look, I've been thinking about it. Where could you find a better front than me, and where could I find a better behind than you?'"

The two got offices in the same building, one on top of the other, and set up extension phones.



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Joan Scott

"When [Jerry] would get a phone call and thought that I should be listening to it, he'd just buzz me, and I'd pick up and listen in on the conversation.

"First of all, we're doing these things and because my name isn't on it, it was a great freedom. I said, 'Who cares what kind of shit it is? Just do it, as long as it doesn't violate any principles. Mostly, what we were doing were sitcoms, and the worst could say about them was that they were just silly and dumb.

"One day, Jerry said to me, 'Look, my psyche can't handle this situation with my name on your work. You've got to take a pseudonym and we'll work as a team openly, but in a different name.'"

Adrian and Joan Scott worked regularly after their initial experience with *Lassie*, spending more than a year with Walt Disney, and joining other blacklisted writers on *Robin Hood*, which was produced in England by Hannah Weinstein, who went out of her way to hire blacklisted writers.

"Hannah Weinstein worked with all these blacklisted writers on television productions," said Joan Scott. "She was hiring every blacklisted writer in town. Hannah Weinstein was very gutsy."

Helen Levitt remembered, "Just being a writer in this community, or a writer's wife, involves always terrible economic insecurity. The Blacklist just made that insecurity more insecure."

## Self-Protection

The atmosphere of terror led to extreme measures of self-protection. Al Levitt remembered one incident with his partner, Jerry Davis.

"I'm very nervous the first time I'm walking into a studio," said Levitt, "and as we go through the entrance into the open, I suddenly grab Jerry's arm. He says, 'What's the matter?'

"I said, 'I just saw Tiger Fafara.'

"And he said, 'What's a Tiger Fafara?'

"I said, 'He's a kid in the Woodcraft Rangers group that I lead, and he knows me as Levitt.'

"Jerry said, 'Jesus Christ! I've heard of people being afraid of the FBI, but the Woodcraft Rangers?'"

As ludicrous as that might sound, that kind of terror forced a lot of blacklisted writers into situations that under other circumstances might have been funny.

Joan Scott: "We rarely went out anywhere we would see anybody. Invariably, wherever we went, something would happen. One time, Mike Wilson and his wife had come back from Paris for a visit. We were going to join them for a drink. In those days, pants were not established yet, if you weren't Katharine Hepburn. We went to go in, and I was in a pants suit, and the maitre d' stopped us and said I couldn't go in. So I stood out in front.



**Adrian and Joan Scott ultimately fled to England.**

"In between, I had worked at Disney for almost a year. Of course, he had no idea who I was. When the maitre d' said I couldn't go in in my pants, Adrian went in to get them. While I'm standing there, in comes Disney -- and he knew me by sight -- with an entourage. Somebody said, 'Oh, Mr. Disney.' I sprang in one leap behind a kon-tiki statue into a running stream in this huge hotel lobby. When Disney went in, Adrian came out looking for me. I said, 'I'm over here behind the bushes.'

"I was so petrified, because if the connection was made, I could no longer work for Disney. As it turned out, he not only never found out, he did everything humanely possible to get me to continue writing for him when we went to London. As far as I know, he never found out."

But that wasn't Joan Scott's only brush with danger. Even after she and Adrian moved to England, the fear continued. Joan had interviewed with a well-known, and flirtatious, agent named Jennings Lang one afternoon.

"We had already had to come up with a cover story when I worked at Disney, because in those days, there were so few women writers, the first thing they asked you anyway as a women was: 'What does your husband do?' So we had made up this story. My husband is an old guy who was at home with the nurse."

That evening, they went out to dinner with another couple:

"We're sitting there in this restaurant, and Adrian said, 'I think Jennings Lang is sitting over there in the corner with a party.' Adrian sees him and we're with this other couple who we've never met before. And Adrian said, 'I think Jennings is coming to the table.'

"I completely panicked. All I could think of was the connection with the pen name. I'm saying, 'Oh, my god!' and sliding underneath, and this couple doesn't know what's going on. Jennings comes to the table, and I'm hiding behind Adrian. And Jennings leans around Adrian and says, 'Miss Court. How nice to see you so soon again.'

"This other couple doesn't know who Miss Court is. Adrian leaps to his feet and says, heroically, 'I understand you're trying to steal my writer,' like he's a producer and I'm just having dinner with him. And this whole thing is playing out with this bewildered couple.

"We get in a taxi, and I weep all the way home. That was the lowest low point."

Although some of the stories may sound humorous, put yourself in their place and imagine a time when jumping behind a statue into a stream seemed to be the only way to save your life.

### **They Never Forget**

"When all this began to happen," says Del Reisman, "I was really astonished that it was happening in America, and at the same time,



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**Del Reisman**

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For both Helen Levitt and Joan Scott, the Blacklist was intensely personal. Helen Levitt felt that "Al's career was crippled; there was no way he could catch up." For Joan Scott, the personal effect was even greater: "I feel the whole situation with the Blacklist actually killed Adrian. I think he just didn't want to live. It was too hard." Adrian Scott died Christmas Day 1972, at the age of 61.

Helen Levitt said, "People we spent every weekend with told us not to come to their house. Nobody called us; nobody came near us. We were totally isolated. The loneliness and the isolation, I think as I look back, was the most painful part of it."

"I likened it to somebody being tortured in Nazi Germany," says Joan Scott. "They're pulling out his fingernails. There's another prisoner over here, and he's saying, 'Don't pull my fingernails out. I can't stand pain. Pull his.'"

"That's what it came down to. I can't stand the idea of losing my career, my livelihood, my way of life. Do it to that person. I never forgave informers. I never will."

### **Ending With a Whimper**

After years of hiding, deception, degradation, and financial and emotional strain, the blacklisted writers gradually noticed that it was all over. It was the '60s and the times, they were a-changin'. The once-disparaged writers were suddenly working again, and in some cases, they were considered heroes.

Joan Scott says she knew the Blacklist was over "when we'd go out in public and not be afraid. There were just so many years there that we were living in the shadows."

Why go through the torment? Del Reisman remembers talking to a producer and a blacklisted friend of theirs, trying to find a way to help:

"Finally, the producer said to him, directly, across the lunch table, 'Why don't you just come clean?' In other words, why don't you either just go to Washington or do it right here in the Federal Building? Just say, 'This was my association. I went to these meetings. I did this. I did that.' What's the problem? Why not do that, and then you're cleared and you go on with your life? I remember this guy had tears in his eyes, and he said, 'You don't understand. This has to do with loyalty to people, with betrayal. It has to do with the whole substance of your life.'"