

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

ALVAH BESSIE: A STUDY OF ONE OF THE "HOLLYWOOD TEN"
1)

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in

Mass Communication

by

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DEDICATION

For Alvah Bessie, of course, without whom
this would be 174 pieces of blank paper.

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ABSTRACT

ALVAH BESSIE:

A STUDY OF ONE OF
THE "HOLLYWOOD TEN"

by

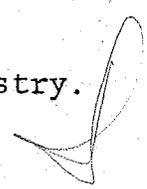
Jerrold I. Zinnamon

Master of Arts in Mass Communication

At the conclusion of World War II, there emerged a national fear that Communism had made powerful inroads into the government and industries of the United States.

In Hollywood, in the motion-picture industry, that fear manifested itself in a suspicion that Communists were preparing to take over the Industry.

Early in 1947, the House Committee on Un-American Activities, at the request of an organization made up of members of the Film Industry, the ^{"Motion Picture"} "Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals," decided to investigate "Communist infiltration" into the motion-picture industry.



The hearings that followed produced ten witnesses who refused to disclose either their professional or political affiliations. As a result of that stand, they were cited for contempt of Congress, convicted, fined \$1,000 each and sentenced to one year's imprisonment. (Two received fines of \$500 each, and six month's prison terms.) Those men have become known as the "Hollywood Ten."

One of them was author Alvah Bessie.

This study examines his history as a politically motivated author and journalist, and seeks to prove the hypothesis that his political and social orientation not only determined his position before the House Committee, but that his "radical" history, and not his relatively brief career as a screenwriter, was actually responsible for his being subpoenaed to appear before that body.

This thesis also seeks to determine that Bessie's screenplays not only did not contain Communist propaganda, but, due to the very studio structure under which he was employed, could not; while the novels, non-fiction works, and articles he has produced, and over which he had complete or even partial control of the final product, did, and do, contain strong and forthright social and political comment.

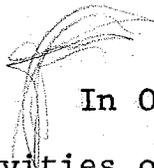
The thesis is also significant in that for the first time, ever, Mr. Bessie answers the very questions

he refused to answer when asked by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. In addition, he also explains why he and his nine co-witnesses willingly subjected themselves to imprisonment and blacklisting rather than reveal with what trade unions they were affiliated, and what their political associations may have been.

The principal argument of this study is that Alvah Bessie was not only the victim of a national panic but also of an insidious campaign by forces anxious to control the content of motion pictures as well as dictate who should and should not be employed in that industry.

CHAPTER I

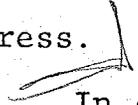
INTRODUCTION



In October, 1947, the Committee on Un-American Activities of the House of Representatives investigated "The Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry."

Nineteen men--twelve screenwriters, five directors, one actor and one producer were subpoenaed to appear before the Committee to testify as to: (a) whether they were members of the Screen Writers' Guild, (b) whether they were "now, or ever have been a member of the Communist Party."¹

Of the nineteen, ten were called upon to testify. Each, in turn, not only refused to answer the Committee's questions but accused the Committee of being unconstitutional and in violation of the rights guaranteed to all citizens under the First Amendment to the Constitution by directing them to answer questions regarding their professional and political affiliations. As a result, all ten were cited for, and later convicted of, contempt of Congress.



In April, 1950, the Supreme Court decided not to review the case, and in June, the District Court in

Washington, D.C. upheld the contempt citations and sentenced eight of "The Ten" to prison for terms of one year and a fine of one thousand dollars each. The other two received terms of six months each and a fine of five hundred dollars apiece.²

Within the past several years, renewed interest has been shown in the "Hollywood Ten," their action and themselves. A number of books have dealt with the subject. At least two feature films have been produced, as well as many "retrospectives," panel discussions and radio and television appearances in which the surviving members of "The Ten" have participated.

In spite of the interest in, and the attention paid to the subject, a general vagueness remains as to:

1. Who they were;
2. Why they took and maintained the position they did;
3. Why they were sent to prison;
4. Why they were blacklisted in their profession.

The passage of time, as well as the various books, periodical and newspaper articles and arguments advanced by partisans of both sides have muddied the reasons. To clarify them fully would take ten in-depth studies.

This thesis will direct its focus upon one member of the "Hollywood Ten," Alvah Bessie. By limiting my study to a single individual, it will be possible to

scrutinize the various reasons and motivations that influenced, if not openly dictated, the critical action of one man before the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Alvah Bessie was selected as the subject for this study for two principal reasons:

1. His entire professional history has been involved, in one form or another, in the area of mass media.
2. His personal history is that of a man committed to principles utterly inimical to those professed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and whose career was not only interrupted but actually terminated by the stand he took before that body, and whose subsequent employment in any area was made extremely difficult.

In his statement before the U.S. District Court in Washington, D.C., at the time of his conviction and sentencing, in 1950, Bessie said:

In 1938, when I enlisted in the International Brigade of the Spanish Republican Army, I was convinced that I was helping to preserve my country from international fascism. When I stood before the House Committee in 1947 I considered that as merely another episode in the same struggle.⁴

In order to judge the factors involved in determining his position before the House Committee, Bessie's work in all areas of mass-media, i.e. motion pictures, television, radio, magazines, newspapers and books have been examined against the international and national scene of

the period, as well as a look at the various "party line" positions of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) during the years when Bessie was an acknowledged member.

By studying Mr. Bessie's work against the above-mentioned criteria, this study will evaluate the extent to which his social and political philosophies influenced his professional work in the various branches of media, and how they ultimately influenced, if not actually determined, his stand before the House Committee.

In addition, the thesis includes original source material, never before released, regarding Bessie's professional and political affiliations--the very information he steadfastly denied the Committee. That information alone imparts to this study a significance and relevance no other work on the subject contains.

A description of how this thesis is organized may prove helpful in clarifying the methodology I have employed. The paper is divided into several separate sections. Some of the titles are taken from Mr. Bessie's works.

II. DWELL IN THE WILDERNESS

This portion touches on Alvah Bessie's childhood, youth, schooling and early career, climaxing with his enlistment into the Abraham Lincoln Battalion of the International Brigade, and his departure to fight in Spain.

The principal sources for this section consist of several in-depth recorded interviews with Mr. Bessie, as well as accounts appearing in Men in Battle, Inquisition in Eden and Spain Again.

III. A MAN IN BATTLE

This chapter follows Bessie's career from his participation in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion during the Spanish Civil War; his return from Spain; his employment as drama critic for the New Masses magazine; the writing and publishing of his account of the Spanish Civil War, Men in Battle; his second novel, Bread and a Stone, to his hiring by Warner Brothers studios as a contract screenwriter.

The principal sources studied are Men in Battle, Bread and a Stone, dramatic and literary criticism and feature articles appearing in the New Masses magazine, as well as various other accounts of the Spanish Civil War, and other general history books presenting the escalating national and world events of the era.

IV. INQUISITION IN EDEN

This major section of the study covers the period of Bessie's employment as a screenwriter through his appearance before the House Committee, through his conviction, sentencing, imprisonment and return to society.

The significant material studied for this section includes: the transcripts of the Hearings of the House

Committee on Un-American Activities Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry, 1947; Hollywood on Trial by Gordon Kahn; Report on Blacklisting, Vol. I, The Movies, by John Cogley; The Committee by Walter Goodman; The House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1945-1950 by Robert K. Carr; A Journal of the Plague Years by Stefan Kanfer; Thirty Years of Treason by Eric Bentley; Are You Now or Have You Ever Been by Eric Bentley; Only Victims by Robert Vaughn; The Time of the Toad by Dalton Trumbo; newspaper and periodical accounts of the Committee hearings, and other related pertinent material, including Alvah Bessie's autobiographical work, Inquisition in Eden, and his credited screenplays written during the period.

V. ALVAH BESSIE, UN-AMERICAN

This chapter examines the events in Bessie's life and career from his release from prison through the period of his blacklisting in the motion picture industry; the writing of his 3rd and 4th novels, The Un-Americans, and The Symbol; his return to Spain in 1967 to collaborate on a screenplay, España Otra Vez (Spain Again), and the book that resulted from that experience, Spain Again; and his television adaptation of The Symbol, The Sex Symbol.

Among the sources consulted in this section are various articles written by Mr. Bessie appearing in such

diverse publications as Film Comment; Film Culture; The San Francisco Chronicle; The San Francisco Examiner; The People's World; The Moscow Literary Gazette (USSR); Das Magazin (German Democratic Republic); his novels, The Un-Americans, and, The Symbol; his autobiographical works, Inquisition in Eden and Spain Again, and his teleplay The Sex Symbol, and the reviews of those books and teleplay.

VI. CONCLUSION

This chapter presents an evaluation of Bessie's work, and the influence of his Marxist political and social orientation upon that work, in print and on film, and how, if, at all, those influences determined his position before the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

I found that the most significant literature studied in the preparation of this thesis was Alvah Bessie's autobiographical works.

Men in Battle (1939) is generally acknowledged to be one of the most insightful volumes dealing with the action of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion during the Spanish Civil War, detailing the characters of many of the members of the Battalion, as well as a number of factors that precipitated that conflict.

Inquisition in Eden (1965) offers a first-person account of the author's experiences in Hollywood as a screenwriter; his appearances before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and his imprisonment

in the Federal Correctional Institution in Texarkana, Texas, for contempt of Congress.

Apart from an occasional newspaper or magazine article, television interview or reference in a book by someone interested in the subject, Bessie's book remains the only work that treats the entire episode in a first-person style. While some scholars may declare the book's value is vitiated by its subjectivity and openly acknowledged bias, the insights it provides into the entire situation, I found to be of invaluable aid.

Spain Again (1975) treats of Bessie's return to Spain after a twenty-nine year absence, to collaborate on a screenplay and perform in the film, España Otra Vez (Spain Again). Published as a companion piece to a new edition of Men in Battle, Spain Again is more than a memoir. In addition to relating the making of the picture and a revisiting of the locales where he had seen battle action twenty-nine years before, Spain Again includes a ringing, well-documented indictment of the Franco regime from its inception.

In addition, Bessie's novels provide much light into his development as a socially-conscious, Marxist oriented author.

Bread and a Stone (1941) is set in the era of the "Great Depression." The story is based on an actual murder committed by an acquaintance of Bessie's, with a revolver that Bessie had loaned to him. The book was

written, in part, as an attempt to save the man's life. Although it did not succeed, the novel does present an examination of economic events and the social behavior of the time, in dialectical terms, and shows the influence of Marxist thinking upon Bessie's writing.

The un-Americans (1957) is, in my opinion, clearly the most overtly "political" of all Bessie's fiction. Briefly, the story is concerned with the moral struggle of two men, long-time friends, summoned to testify before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. One of the two succumbs to the intimidations of "powerful forces" and the fear of personal ostracism and professional destruction, and testifies against his friend. The protagonist openly discusses his Communist affiliation and his commitment to Marxist principles, and the protagonist is in Bessie's words, a presentation of "a Communist of that period as he actually was, his weaknesses, as well as his strengths."³

The Symbol (1967) has as its setting the motion picture industry. The plot explores the tormented life and tragic death of a motion picture "super star," and the ruthless exploitation to which she is subjected, and succumbs. In direct contrast to The un-Americans, The Symbol, while it is a devastating condemnation of an industry that makes profit from human lives, is the least openly political of all Alvah Bessie's novels.

In addition to Bessie's fiction and non-fiction, novels and short stories, there is a career's worth of published articles dealing with a multitude of themes. The great majority have appeared in leftist publications.

For those readers exclusively interested in Bessie's history as a member of the "Hollywood Ten," much pertinent material exists:

Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry, Eightieth Congress, First Session (U.S. Printing Office, 1947). This document is a complete transcript of the entire hearing.

The House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1945 - 1950 (Robert Carr, 1952) covers substantially the same material as does the actual hearing transcript, but the book also offers an interesting analysis of the Committee's practices as well as a comparison of six major U.S. newspapers' coverage of the various hearings.

The Committee (Walter Goodman, 1968) also details the various Committee hearings, but is somewhat ambivalent in its conclusions as to the Committee's effectiveness; their right to ask the questions they did, and, on the other hand, the witnesses' right to take the positions they did.

Hollywood on Trial (Gordon Kahn, 1948) written shortly after the 1947 hearing and before "The Ten" were convicted and imprisoned, presents an accurate and

insightful view of the witnesses (both friendly and unfriendly); a clear presentation of the issues (they had not yet become blurred by time and confused by prejudices--on both sides); a study of the highly vocal but short-lived support for the then indicted "Unfriendly Ten" which had not yet evaporated, and a contemporary look at the producers' decision to institute a blacklist. The book is of great interest and value as a work of reportage of a piece of history as it was being made. The author, Gordon Kahn, was one of the nineteen subpoenaed witnesses, albeit he was not called upon to testify during the 1947 hearings.

A Journal of the Plague Years (Stefan Kanfer, 1973) presents an overview of the years of the blacklist during the late 1940's and '50's, and its devastating effect upon the lives of the victims who endured it. The book is written in an easy, casual, almost gossip-column style. It is freckled with inaccuracies and several completely fictional accounts regarding a number of blacklisted persons.

Report on Blacklisting: Vol. I. Movies (ed. John Cogley, 1956) is a well-documented, highly accurate, study of the results of both the 1947 and 1951 House Committee on Un-American Activities investigations of the motion picture industry. The book includes an essay by Dorothy B. Jones titled, Communism in the Movies, an in-depth content

analysis of all the films written, directed and produced by the "Hollywood Ten," and an investigation into the effects of the House Committee investigations upon the content of Hollywood Films from 1947 to the time of the book's publication.

Only Victims (Robert Vaughn, 1972) is a scholarly, well-documented account of a number of investigations into all phases of show business. Dr. Vaughn concentrates his study on the Broadway stage, but the Committee's probes into films, radio and television are not overlooked. The book contains a list of those witnesses who named names, as well as the names named.

My Life on the Blacklist (Ring Lardner, Jr., 1961), an article written for the Saturday Evening Post offers a personal view of a successful screenwriter's struggle to survive after being blacklisted in his chosen profession.

The Time of the Toad (Trumbo, 1949 (?)) covers the same material as the other studies, but he does present much concrete evidence as to the unethical and illegal action of the Committee.

Both Mr. Lardner and Mr. Trumbo were members of the jailed, blacklisted "Hollywood Ten," and their work regarding that subject should be read with that knowledge in mind--albeit they make no secret of the fact.

NOTES

¹Alvah Bessie, scenarist; Herbert Biberman, director; Bertholt Brecht, scenarist and playwright; Richard Collins, scenarist; Edward Dmytryk, director; Gordon Kahn, scenarist; Howard Koch, scenarist; Ring Lardner, Jr., scenarist; John Howard Lawson, scenarist; Albert Maltz, scenarist; Lewis Milestone, director; Samuel Ornitz, scenarist; Larry Parks, actor; Irving Pichel, director; Robert Rossen, scenarist-director; Waldo Salt, scenarist; Adrian Scott, scenarist-producer; Dalton Trumbo, scenarist. The names underlined above became known as "The Ten," "The Hollywood Ten," "The Unfriendly Ten." Those terms are used interchangeably throughout this study.

²Herbert Biberman and Edward Dmytryk.

³Letter from Alvah Bessie to Jerrold Zinnamon, June 21, 1977.

⁴For Bessie's full statement, see Appendix B.

CHAPTER II

DWELL IN THE WILDERNESS

My strange career has really consisted of drifting through life, wondering what is going to happen next.¹

"I was born on June 4th, 1904, in New York City on 120th Street, between 7th Avenue and Lenox. My mother used to say, 'that was when Harlem was a respectable neighborhood.'"²

Historically, 1904 was a year of comparative quiet, although events were taking place which would, in the future, produce repercussions that would shake, if not actually change, the world.

In February, the Japanese, fearing Russian hegemony in the Far East, sank three Russian battleships, captured Port Arthur in Manchuria, and began the Russo-Japanese War.

In April, the Entente Cordiale between Great Britain and France was signed. It was a pact that would prove significant ten years later, with the outbreak of World War I.

On July 4th, construction of the Panama Canal began, which, when completed, in 1915, would give the United States a "two ocean" navy and elevate this nation

to the rank of a first-class military power.

President Theodore Roosevelt was completing the term of William McKinley who had been killed by an assassin's bullet in 1901, and carrying out the McKinley policy of "Manifest Destiny" for the United States.

During the next several years incidents and developments would escalate in frequency and intensity until, in 1914, the First World War would explode into being.

During those early years of the 20th Century, Alvah Bessie was attending school in the New York Public School System. After being graduated from high school he entered Columbia College, from which he received an A.B. degree in 1924.

It was in that year, more by accident than anything else, that I became an "actor" with the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village as an extra in a play. I didn't have any lines. I remained an "actor" from the Fall of 1924 through the Fall of 1928. After four years, I had a feeling I was not going to be a great actor, and I therefore quit the theatre.

At that time, I had, somehow or other, collected exactly a thousand books, and I sold those one thousand books to all the people I could think of in the theatre who were interested in books which enabled me to go to Paris for the first time in December, 1928. I stayed there until February, 1929.³

Armed with letters of introduction, several years of high school and college French, and claiming to be a friend of the journalist, Vincent Sheean, Bessie secured a job on The Paris Times, an English language newspaper

"which came out in the afternoons and merely rewrote the French morning papers. It was run by a fellow named G. M. ArchAmbaud, who, many years later, was arrested and imprisoned as a collaborator of the Nazis. He was a fascist even in 1929."⁴

It was a short-lived job. In March, 1929, Bessie returned to New York and became a free-lance writer. A succession of short-term jobs followed: manager of a local book store; office manager for a firm which was starting a paperback book club; editor and book designer for a publishing firm that published only mysteries that sold for one dollar apiece. The company soon went out of business.

It was now 1930, the Stock Market had collapsed and employment was difficult to find. Bessie, through an acquaintance, found a job in the "morgue" of the Herald Tribune, clipping and filing stories.

On the 2nd of July, 1930, Bessie married Mary Burnett. That marriage would last seven years, produce two sons, and end in divorce in 1938.

That same summer Bessie found a job as a fact checker and proof reader for The New Yorker magazine. After several months he was summarily fired, the victim of a practice that was fairly common at the time.

When I asked the make-up editor why I was being fired, after all summer and fall, when there had been

no complaint about my work, he said, "you have been the occasion to us of a great deal of expense in recasting plates." I said, "that's a lie." He said, "well, in any event you are fired. Here is two weeks notice."

I had a hunch there was something odd about this, so I left a book in my desk. When I came back the next day, there, sitting at the desk I had occupied was a man who was a writer on The New Yorker who had been given summer leave. In other words, they had merely replaced him for the summer by me, and when he returned they canned me.⁵

It was 1931. The crush of the depression was at its most extreme. Neither Bessie nor his wife could find employment. The short-stories kept being written, sent out--and more often than not, returned.⁶

Income finally appeared in the way of a job for a couple to work in a summer home in Landgrove, Vermont.

Bessie tells of the situation:

The owners wanted a couple for the summer; the wife to cook and be the maid, the husband to be the houseman, empty the garbage, do various chores, drive the station wagon and play chess with the drunken guests when they came up over the weekend to drink bootlegged liquor.

When the owners decided to close the place at the end of the summer, they also decided to keep the furniture of ours which they had brought up as a favor to us.

We thought it would be nice to stay in Vermont, though how we did that without any income or furniture was an interesting problem. But we found a very small farm for ten dollars a month, which we moved into, and picked up some furniture at an auction.

I entered into correspondence with almost every magazine in New York trying to get books to review. They sent me quite a few. This kept us going. I even went to New York, having bought a car for ten dollars, visiting magazines, looking for places to sell short stories. I sold most of the ones I wrote, although many I didn't.⁷

It was during one of those trips to New York that Bessie met and entered into friendship with an editor at Scribner's Magazine. His name was Kyle Crichton.

He became a major influence in my life in moving me toward the direction of Marxism. I remember meeting him in his office. I asked him for books to review. He said, "we have no books to review." I must have looked depressed because he asked, "do you need the money badly?" I said, "yes, I need the money badly." He said, "then we have books to review."

He not only gave me four or five books a month to review, he sold short-stories to Scribner's Magazine for me, and he began sending me Marxist literature. He did more than that. He sent occasional small checks for \$10, \$20, \$30, \$40. He sent boxes of food. He came up during the summers to visit us, and it was through him that I met other people who had developed this political point of view, including Granville Hicks and James T. Farrell.⁸

While writing short-stories and book reviews, Bessie supplemented his income by digging potatoes for a local farmer. He received potatoes in exchange for his labor.

If the Marxist material that Kyle Crichton had been sending him had set him to thinking about the system he was living under, a real-life incident took place that would cause theory to materialize into fact. Because of its impact on Bessie's thinking, and its importance in shaping the political philosophy which would influence the rest of his life, it is worth repeating in full, and as he related it:

An interesting and very spectacular thing happened. While we were harvesting the potatoes,

the A&P truck arrived. The man said, "we're buying potatoes." The farmer said, "well, I've got thousands of bushels of potatoes. What are you paying?"

I can't remember the exact figure but it was something like twenty-five or thirty cents a bushel. At which point the farmer became outraged and said, "damned if I'll sell my potatoes for that price. It cost me more than that to grow the damned things. I bought a potato digger. I bought chemical fertilizer. What the hell kind of a price is that?"

The A&P man said, "well, that's what we're offering."

The farmer said, with a great deal of emotion, "before I'll sell potatoes at twenty-five or thirty cents a bushel, I'll let 'em rot in the cellar," which is precisely what he did. He also gave them away to anybody who wanted them.

The next summer he put in just enough potatoes to feed his family of ten children, his wife and himself. The A&P man came around buying potatoes, and said they were offering seventy cents a bushel. Of course, the farmer had no potatoes to sell.

It occurred to me that this made no sense whatsoever, that the price of potatoes being bought from the farmer who produced them should be thirty cents one year and the next year it should be seventy. Theoretically, there are more people to buy potatoes this year than there were last; there is just as much demand for the potatoes and there were just as many potatoes being produced--except by my farmer friend. Why should the price suddenly go up or down?

I got the idea in my head that these prices were being manipulated by the people who bought the potatoes from the farmers. And this jibed perfectly with the material that Kyle Crichton had been sending to me.⁹

Bessie continued to operate his small farm, write and frequently sell short-stories and work on a novel. In 1935, after three consecutive attempts, and with his novel, Dwell in the Wilderness, completed and already accepted by a publisher, Bessie was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for creative writing. "It paid \$2000, and, of course, the

book didn't sell at all."¹⁰ The story is of a mid-Western family, running from 1876 to 1925, set in Michigan, New York and Chicago.

The same year, Bessie renewed an old acquaintance with a man named Edward Cushing who was the editor of two Sunday magazine sections of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle. Cushing offered Bessie the position of assistant editor of those two sections.

He accepted, and late in December 1935, Alvah Bessie quit New England and farm life to return to New York and the job of newspaper man.

His position as assistant editor of the two magazine sections entailed writing book, moving picture and play reviews and editorials. He earned fifty dollars a week ". . . which was a considerable amount of money to earn in 1936. The interesting thing is that my wife and I and our two sons lived on this \$50.00 without too great difficulty, in Brooklyn."¹¹

By now, Bessie had become a member of the Communist Party of the United States of America (CPUSA). His interest in the class-struggle was growing and he even became actively involved.

There was a tremendous strike going on in 1936, in Brooklyn. It was the East Coast Seamen's strike. I wrote a letter under the name Joe Curran, who was then the President of the National Maritime Union. I went over to his headquarters in New York and said, "I'm a worker on the Brooklyn Eagle and

I'm outraged by the Eagle's position on the strike, and I suggest you send this letter to the editor of the Eagle because I think you should refute their editorial position." Rather than sending it to the paper, Joe showed up with a delegation and asked for the editor and presented the letter to him.

I wrote other stuff for the N.M.U. while my wife was staffing a food kitchen for the pickets on the waterfront. The National Maritime Union strike was eventually won, and this advanced my understanding of the class struggle.¹²

With that deeper understanding of the class struggle, Bessie soon found himself involved in another strike situation. This one on his own paper, The Brooklyn Daily Eagle.

The publisher of the Eagle . . . decided he would like to buy a rival newspaper in Brooklyn called The Brooklyn Times-Union. He did buy it. It was then his idea to put out both papers with the same staff; that is, dump the staff of the Times-Union and have the editorial staff of the Brooklyn Eagle put out both papers.

He knew he couldn't pull this stunt with the workers of the composing room because they had the typographical union, probably the most powerful union in the United States, at that time. And very reactionary. But at least he could not put out two papers with the typographical staff of one paper.

The Newspaper Guild which was fairly young went to [the publisher] and said, "we do not approve of your putting out two newspapers with the editorial staff of one newspaper, and if you persist in doing so, and do not hire the staff from the Brooklyn Times-Union to put out their own paper, as they have for years, we will go on strike."

[The publisher] called a meeting of the staff of the Eagle in the city room. He actually burst into tears. He said, "I had thought we were all one, big, happy family, but if you force me to hire the staff of the Brooklyn Times-Union, which I cannot afford to do, two newspapers will go down the drain, and none of us will have a job."

It sounded very persuasive to some of the people of The Newspaper Guild in the city room of the Brooklyn Eagle who had no so-called class

consciousness. However, in a meeting of the Newspaper Guild shop we voted almost unanimously to go out on strike. And we did go out on strike. And we won the strike. [The publisher] hired the staff of the Brooklyn Times-Union, and he did not go bankrupt but made more money than ever. About a year later he sold both papers.¹³

But even as Alvah Bessie was carrying a picket sign in front of the Brooklyn Daily Eagle, distant events were taking place which were claiming his attention, absorbing his interest and instilling in him a passion that was to develop into a life-long dedication--the reestablishment of the Republican Government of Spain. He would soon exchange his picket sign and his typewriter for a rifle and ammunition. He would put not only his developing political and social consciousness on the line, but his life as well. He was declaring open war upon an enemy whom he would fight for the rest of his life.

NOTES

¹Tape recorded interview with Alvah Bessie,
March 7, 1977.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Four of Bessie's short stories appear in, Edward J. O'Brien, ed., Best Short Stories of 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934 (New York: Dodd Mead and Co., 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934). Only We Are Barren, 1931, p. 27; Horizon, 1932, p. 16; A Little Walk, 1933, p. 14; No Final Word, 1934, p. 15. One of Bessie's short stories appears in Harry Hansen, ed., O Henry Memorial Award Prize Stories, 1936 (Garden City, New York, 1936) A Personal Issue, p. 39.

⁷Tape recorded interview with Alvah Bessie,
March 7, 1977.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

CHAPTER III

A MAN IN BATTLE

Your future lies here in Spain, and perhaps in more than one sense, at that. You started something when you joined the International Brigade, papa.¹

In 1936, three closely related events took place which would drastically alter Alvah Bessie's life. Because of their deep significance, it is of value in understanding Bessie's life and career to review them.

In Spain, which five years earlier had overthrown the bankrupt monarchy and proclaimed a republican government, a Popular Front administration composed of liberals, Socialists and Communists was elected in February.

Early in July, in Morocco, an Army revolt led by General Francisco Franco took place. The revolt spread quickly to Spain where many divisions of the army joined with right wing groups to rebel against the legally elected government. Franco and his outlawed Falangist Party openly declared war against the Spanish republican government.

In August a non-aggression pact sponsored by Great Britain and France was signed by twenty-seven nations including the United States, Italy, Germany and the Soviet

Union. It was a pact that was never totally lived up to. From the outset, Germany and Italy openly supplied General Franco and his Falangist forces with guns, planes, tanks, "volunteer" troops and other materiel. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, alone supported the forces of the legitimate Spanish Republic.

The chief foreign support for the Spanish Republic, however, did not come from nations but from groups of volunteers formed into battalions and organized into various International Brigades. It was a unit comprised of volunteers from the United States known as the Abraham Lincoln Battalion of the XVth International Brigade of the Spanish Republican Army in which Alvah Bessie enlisted.

Early in 1937, Bessie quit his job with the Brooklyn Daily Eagle to work for the Spanish republican Government in New York City for an organization called the Spanish Information Bureau. "It was a propaganda bureau that put out releases, serviced newspapers and magazines with photographs directly from Spain of what was happening there, put out pamphlets, leaflets and other such material. I worked for them for about seven or eight months."²

In January, 1938, Alvah Bessie, a man with a mounting conviction that the fight to save the Spanish republican government was part of a larger fight to save democracy on all of the fronts where it was being

threatened, left the United States to put far more than his written words "on the line."

Men went to Spain for various reasons . . . I knew about myself, that the historical event of Spain coincided with a long-felt compulsion to complete the destruction of the training I had received all through my youth. There were two major reasons for my being there; to achieve self-integration, and to lend my individual strength (such ~~that~~^{as} it was) to the fight against our eternal enemy--oppression; and the validity of the second reason was not impaired by the fact that it was a shade weaker than the first, for they were both part of the same thing. It was necessary for me, at that state of my development as a man to work (for the first time) in a large body of men; to submerge myself in that mass, seeking neither distinction nor preferment (the reverse of my activities for the past several years) and in this way to achieve self-discipline, patience and unselfishness--the opposite of a long middle-class training--and the construction of a life that would be geared to other men and the world events that circumscribed them. There is much truth in the old saws--for a desperate disease, a desperate cure.³

Nowhere in the pages of Men in Battle, nor in any of his subsequent works does he tell us whether his "desperate cure" did, in fact, heal his "desperate disease." The fact that he did succeed in working in a huge body of men and achieving self-integration in that mass can be attested to, not only by the fact that he fought well and with courage, but was accorded the respect due a good soldier by his fellow Battalion members; the fact that he was able to achieve self-discipline was demonstrated nine years later when he stood before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and steadfastly refused, at the expense of his own career and the risk of

imprisonment, to answer questions he believed to be unethical as well as illegal. This critical phase of Bessie's history will be studied in some depth in the following chapter.

At this point, the question may well be raised, did Alvah Bessie fight in the Army of the Spanish Republic solely to attain the objectives cited in his book, or, being, at that time, an active member of the CPUSA, did he fight to help advance the cause of world socialism?

I asked him that specific question, and in an interview recorded especially for the purpose of this study, Mr. Bessie addressed himself to the question:

Certainly my experiences in Spain confirmed my Communist convictions. I, like most of the guys who went there, joined the Spanish Communist Party, but we had no Communist units in Spain after the first months of the war. There was a Communist Brigade. There was an Anarchist Brigade. There was a Socialist Brigade. All of these purely political units were dissolved by the Spanish Republic during the first year of the war, and a unified army was formed. Theoretically, political party membership was not encouraged in the army, and did not exist in the army, except, of course, it did exist, because like-minded people belonging to these parties met in their own groups in efforts to help win the war. That was the only objective of the Spanish Communist Party. It put aside all speculations or possibilities of ultimate socialism for Spain. Socialism was not on the agenda. The Spanish people had no idea what socialism was, or wanted it, or was interested in it. But they were definitely interested in retaining and saving the Republic.⁴

By Fall, 1938, the cause of the Spanish Republic was doomed. In mid-November all International Brigades

were withdrawn from the war. By March, 1939, the troops of Francisco Franco had entered Madrid and the Spanish Civil War was, to all intent and purpose, over.

In December, 1938, the survivors of the Abraham Lincoln returned to the United States. Alvah Bessie, now divorced from his first wife, found himself in New York, alone and looking for work.

1939 would prove to be a busy and eventful year for Bessie. He would produce his first non-fiction volume, Men in Battle, which would be published by Charles Scribner's Sons. In Inquisition in Eden, Bessie discusses the events surrounding the book's acceptance for publication, events which would soon come to possess a note of irony.

[Bessie's agent] made an appointment for me with Maxwell Perkins of Charles Scribner's Sons.

Perkins listened to my description of the book and said he would think about it. So, that was that. Another bum steer, another delay in finding a source of income. But the hand of God intervened at this point in the person of Ernest Hemingway (whom I had . . . met in Spain.), for [the agent] phoned a couple of days later and told me to call on Perkins to discuss a contract.

Hemingway, he said, had visited him the day after our interview and he had told him about the book I wanted to write. "Grab it," he quoted Hemingway as saying; "it'll be the best book written by any of the guys . . ."

. . . the book was published under the title Men in Battle and despite a full page review by [Vincent] Sheean in the New York Herald Tribune and the only review I ever got in Time, it never sold. For it appeared the week Hitler invaded Poland, and people had other things to read-- the newspapers.⁵

Bessie also wrote a series of articles about the American volunteers in Spain. When the newspaper editor who asked for them declined to print them, he took them to the New Masses magazine, a left-wing publication edited by a man named Joe North who had known Bessie in Spain, where North was a correspondent for the Daily Worker. He did not buy Bessie's articles either, but he did offer him the job of drama critic for the magazine. Bessie accepted. It was an association that would last for more than three years.

During that period, Bessie wrote more than theatre and motion picture criticism. He reviewed books and wrote feature articles. His Marxist convictions were deepening, and his dedication to the cause of the fallen Spanish Republic was still strong.

On August 23rd, 1939, the Soviet Union which had openly supported war against Fascism in Spain, signed a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. The Communist Party of the United States, which up to that time had favored changing the Neutrality Act to allow shipment of arms to countries who were victims of the Fascist attack, suddenly termed the war (which had started on September 1st) an "Imperialist Struggle,"⁶ charging England and France with responsibility for the conflict.

John Cogley, in his Report on Blacklisting, wrote:
" . . . Communists, a) opposed the draft; b) opposed lend

lease, and c) promoted the slogan, 'The Yanks Are Not Coming.'"⁷

The pact not only caused dissention but much soul-searching among many loyal members of the Communist Party, and as a result, many left the Party. Bessie remained loyal.

To my question, "why, after openly fighting against Fascism in Spain did you remain a member of the CPUSA when the German-USSR pact was signed?" Bessie answered:

I suppose, like most CPUSA members, I accepted the CPUSA explanation for the Pact: that is was NOT an alliance directed vs. anyone. That it was a NON-aggression pact in which both Germany and the USSR agreed NOT to attack each other. That it was also true that the British negotiators sent to Moscow were not empowered to reach ANY kind of an agreement at all, but were to stall until Hitler attacked the USSR which is what Britain wanted. (See Albert Kahn's book High Treason, among others.) Certainly I also saw the newsreels with the swastika flying at Moscow airport when Von Ribbentrop arrived to negotiate and sign the pact and it made me squirm; it almost made me puke. But then I rationalized--and so did others--that REALPOLITIK was beyond my comprehension, and anything the USSR could do to stave off war, for even a week, was to the good. . . . Does this explain anything beyond my naiveté and my desire to think nothing but good about the USSR?⁸

Bessie's open hatred for Fascism vs. his loyalty to The Communist Party and its current position presented a contradiction he may well have been trying to reconcile when he wrote an article, We Love Democracy Too Well, which appeared in the New Masses (July 2, 1940):

We [the members of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion] said, "we'll get home in time to be drafted into the American army to fight a different sort of war."

But we veterans will not go to fight in this war. . . . the men in Washington and elsewhere are preparing us and exhorting us and rushing us into a war to defend "democracy" against the Hitler terror. (You cannot fool us about the Hitler terror; we have seen it and felt it in our flesh.) They are trying to utilize the people's virulent hatred of Hitler's and Mussolini's fascism to defend and preserve and extend their own peculiar brand of fascism--the American brand and the French brand, and Huey Long said a mouthful when he said that fascism would come to us disguised as anti-fascism.⁹

If Bessie, influenced or not by the current position of the CPUSA, truly believed that it was more important to educate the American people to the dangers of Fascism than to openly wage war against it, he and his fellow veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade also believed that Ernest Hemingway's forthcoming novel, For Whom the Bell Tolls would explain the cause of the Spanish Republic to the American people. The book appeared in October, 1940. It proved to be a bitter disappointment to those who had fought in Spain, but in Bessie's widely reprinted review of Hemingway's novel the Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade found their outraged voice:

The author is less concerned with the fate of the Spanish people, whom I am certain that he loves, than he is with the fate of his hero and heroine, who are himself. They are Hemingway and Hemingway alone . . . in their meaning of individual death, personal happiness, personal misery, personal significance in living and their personal equation is not so deeply felt or understood as to achieve wide significance. For all his groping the author of the Bell has yet to integrate his individual

sensitivity to life with the sensitivity of every human being (read the Spanish people); he has yet to expand his personality as a novelist to embrace the truths of other people everywhere; he has yet to dive deep into the lives of others, and there find his own.¹⁰

It can be noted that those flaws Bessie cites as existing in Hemingway's character are strikingly similar to those faults he found in himself, and which he states were instrumental in sending him to Spain to purge.¹¹

Even as Bessie was decrying Hemingway's lack of class-consciousness, an event was taking place in which he would be involved in a very personal way. It would prove to be the impetus for the creation of his second novel, Bread and a Stone.

A friend of Bessie's, who had fought with him in Spain, made him a present of an automatic pistol, a souvenir of the war. While Bessie was duly grateful, he also knew that it was in violation of the Sullivan Law to maintain a weapon in New York state.

He knew a man who lived in a neighboring state whom he thought might have use for the pistol, living in a rural area, so he loaned it to him.

The man, unemployed and desperate, planned to go into the nearby town and hold up a store to obtain funds. On his way into town, he was picked up by a motorist, an argument ensued, as a result, the motorist was shot and killed.

Bessie's novel, Bread and a Stone, portrays the protagonist as the victim of an exploitative society, and motivated to an act of murder by desperation and the pressures of joblessness. The novel was published in the fall of 1941. Written, in part, to save the real-life killer from electrocution, it failed in that attempt. The book's sales were disappointing. That may well have been due to two facts: 1) the war in Europe was commanding the attention of most people, and 2) the long Depression was finally abating, and people were neither of a mind nor a mood to read novels of social criticism.

On June 22nd, 1941, while Bessie was completing Bread and a Stone, the 22-month old Nazi Germany-USSR non-aggression pact was broken when the Nazi army thrust into the Soviet Union. Now the primary concern of Communist Parties throughout the world was the security of the Soviet Union against Nazi aggression.

A program of "all out aid" to the Soviet Union and Great Britain was called for. The "imperialist war" became "The People's War." The emphasis on isolationism and fighting fascism within the boundaries of the United States now became an urgent demand to fight Naziism and Fascism wherever it appeared and to destroy it with armed might. As to active American participation in the war, that problem was settled six months later, on the morning of December 7th, 1941.

Almost before the sound of the bombs dropping on Pearl Harbor had faded, the Communist Party was calling for the opening of a "Second Front" in Europe to take some of the pressure off the Red Army which was battling the Germans single-handedly. The Communist Party slogan, "The Yanks are not coming" heard and seen so often during the days of the German-Soviet Union pact, now gained two new and significant words--"too late."¹²

Bessie's mixed feelings of loyalty to the Communist Party position of non-intervention as opposed to his own strong anti-fascist feelings were now resolved. The policy of the day and for the next three and a half years would be--"win the war!" And many of the veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade who would not "go to fight in this war," as Bessie had written, promptly enlisted in the U.S. Armed Forces. Regardless of their personal or political motivations, they fought with the same courage and determination they had displayed in Spain, and a number were killed in action.

Bessie continued to write theatre and film criticism for the New Masses, but interspersed were feature articles about army inductees at Fort Bragg, North Carolina; the U.S. Maritime Service at war; the necessity for waging the war on a "second front;" the Armed Forces discrimination against Black doctors.

An organization named "The American Council on Soviet Relations," commissioned Bessie to write a pamphlet titled The Soviet People at War. It appeared in 1942 and was concerned with the life and death struggle of the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany in what they called "The People's War." The pamphlet emphasizes the fact that every element of Soviet life was organized to fight an enemy fanatically determined to exterminate the entire Russian people, and that their unity, high morale and absolute belief in their form of society (in spite of devastating losses) would allow them to fight and ultimately, with allied help on a second front, emerge victorious. The pamphlet cites specific cases of bravery and of heroic sacrifices made by Soviet citizen-soldiers in the name of the U.S.S.R. and the cause of Socialism.

Bessie also authored a booklet titled This is Your Enemy, published by the International Workers Organization Front Line Fighters Fund. The booklet reveals shocking photographs of Nazi atrocities inflicted indiscriminately upon both Soviet military personnel and civilians. Bessie's narrative is compelling and his personal outrage can be felt throughout the text.

We are fighting an enemy who knows no scruples of humanity or kindness; an enemy who prepared for many years for the conquest of the world, and means to achieve it; . . . and who regards, accordingly, the entire population of the world as its natural victim.

Only by opening a second land front on the continent of Europe can the final offensive that will destroy Hitlerism be launched. Only by moving from the west toward Germany, to meet the Red Army moving from the east, can we crush the heart of the Axis between the mighty arms of the people's rage . . . and wipe from the lives of men . . . the blood and horror international fascism has brought upon the world.¹³

Bessie's position with the New Masses came to an end in January, 1943. A totally unexpected offer of employment from Warner Brothers motion picture studios as a contract screen writer was accepted, and Bessie resigned from the magazine for which he had worked for nearly four years, but he had mixed feelings.

[I felt] a curiously mixed sensation of excitement and depression--excitement over the achievement of a "life ambition;" to write for Hollywood, with all that this entailed in means of prestige, opportunity to contribute to the medium, and yes--money; together with a growing conviction of being lost (corrupted? sold out?) because I had abandoned my job on New Masses, where I could really write what I felt and really felt that what I wrote had some impact on our readers. And that job was a symbol of the attitude I had developed during the Depression; my developing radicalism; and the like-minded friends with whom I associated days and nights; and the men we had left behind in the Spanish earth, who had died for what we all believed in--not radicalism, but simple human decency and human love. Would these be found in Hollywood? And where?¹⁴

NOTES

¹ Alvah Bessie, Men in Battle (New York: Scribners & Sons, 1939: reprint ed., San Francisco, Calif.: Chandler & Sharp, 1975), p. 181. All subsequent references are from the above-cited reprint edition.

² Interview with Alvah Bessie. April 30, 1977.

³ Bessie, Men in Battle, pp. 181-182.

⁴ Interview with Alvah Bessie. July 7, 1977.

⁵ Alvah Bessie, Inquisition in Eden (New York: Macmillan Company, 1965: reprint ed., East Berlin: Seven Seas Books, 1967), pp. 26-27. All subsequent references are from the above-cited reprint edition.

⁶ Daily Worker, August 24, 1939.

⁷ John Cogley, Report on Blacklisting, Vol. I, The Movies. Summary of Shifts in the Communist Party Line, 1929 - 1949 (New York, Fund for the Republic, 1956), p. 303.

⁸ Letter from Alvah Bessie to Jerrold Zinnamon, 21 June 1977.

⁹ Alvah Bessie, "We Love Democracy Too Well." New Masses, July 2, 1940, pp. 10-11.

¹⁰ Alvah Bessie, "Review of For Whom the Bell Tolls." New Masses, November 5, 1940, pp. 25-29.

¹¹ See footnote number 1 (Men in Battle, p. 181).

¹² Cogley, op. cit. Vol. II, p. 303.

¹³ Alvah Bessie, This is Your Enemy (New York: International Workers Organization Front Line Fighters Fund, 1942), p. 39.

¹⁴ Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, p. 38.

CHAPTER IV

INQUISITION IN EDEN

General Eisenhower, himself, has refused to reveal his political affiliations, and what's good enough for General Eisenhower is good enough for me.¹

1

Signs and Portents

Alvah Bessie's career as a screenwriter was brief, both in duration and the number of screen credits earned. It is how that career came to a sudden and catastrophic halt, the crisis it created and the long, bitter aftermath it produced that is the chief concern of this study. We shall reach it shortly.

In almost exactly three years as a contract writer for Warner Brothers studios, Bessie won three screenplay credits: The Very Thought of You; Northern Pursuit; Hotel Berlin; and one "original story" credit, Objective Burma, for which he received an Academy Award nomination. After his release from Warner Brothers, he co-authored one more screenplay for Allied Artists studios, an adaptation of an original story, Smart Woman, by author Adela Rogers St. Johns.

Shortly before the end of World War II, a strike began in the motion picture industry. The strikers were members of the painters union, the set decorators, some machinists and electricians, building service workers, plumbers, screen cartoonists, publicists and story analysts (readers). The strikers were formed into a loose organization calling itself the Conference of Studio Unions (CSU).

In Inquisition in Eden, Bessie writes:

The CSU was organized for two purposes: to try to develop an industrial union in Hollywood to replace the old-line craft unions under A.F. of L. leadership and to get some democracy into these predominantly reactionary and hopelessly corrupt organizations, which were dominated by Roy Brewer's International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE).²

A diametrically opposed opinion regarding the genesis as well as the purposes of the CSU was set forth by director Edward Dmytryk when he testified before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. In amplifying upon the point that the "Communist Party was after in Hollywood (1) money, (2) prestige, and (3) control of the content of pictures by taking over the guilds and unions,"³ Dmytryk said:

Their chief effort was in the craft unions. . . . they were successful in organizing a group called the Conference of Studio Unions that did have a great deal to do with the policies. They eventually got so strong that they risked a strike against the IATSE. However, they lost the strike after a very long and serious battle, and that attempt came to nothing.⁴

Both Bessie's analysis and Dmytryk's testimony can be considered to contain open bias; Bessie supporting the movement for a strong, liberal union; Dmytryk, an attempt to reinstate himself, and his position, in the Motion Picture Industry.

However, a more objective source, John Cogley, in his Report on Blacklisting, Vol. I, The Movies found:

At no time in its history . . . did the Conference of Studio Unions diverge from the Communist Party line. In August, 1942, it endorsed the 2nd front resolution. It took a lively interest in the Harry Bridges case. It supported the National Lawyers Guild, . . . the Hollywood Democratic Committee (formerly Hollywood Anti-Nazi League), the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee, the League of American Writers, etc.⁵

On October 5th, 1945 the CSU formed a picket line across the street from Warner Brothers studio. The next day, violence erupted. Photographs appearing in the Los Angeles Times clearly show pickets being attacked by persons with clubs, and the uniformed police using high-pressure water hoses. The accompanying story reports that "the effect of the tear-gas could be felt for blocks away."⁶

On October 8th, another story appearing in the Los Angeles Times quotes a wire from State Senators Jack B. Tenney (Chairman) and Hugh Burns and Assemblyman Fred M. Kraft, members of the State Legislature's Committee on Un-American Activities, to then-Governor Earl Warren requesting his intervention in the strike. In language

that foreshadows future rhetoric, the wire reads, in part:

This jurisdictional strike is spearhead of long range Communist strategy to control motion picture industry as potent medium of propaganda.

. . . This sub-committee is amazed that such a handful of revolutionary Communists can deny lawful owners the use of their property, inflict bodily injury upon hundreds of citizens, defy orders of the courts of California and openly and successfully defy all law enforcing agencies.

The question we are concerned with is the Communist capture and control.

This is definitely an attempt by the Communists to control the motion picture industry.⁷

In Inquisition in Eden, Bessie describes his own, rather tangential, participation in the strike:

I am ashamed to say that I had nothing to do with the strike beyond (a) writing two leaflets on request of the story analysts' guild and (b) observing the picket line from across the street at the behest of the SWG [Screen Writers' Guild], with Howard Koch [at the time, another Warner Brothers contract screenwriter].⁸

When the strike ended, at least temporarily,⁹ and the writers who had voted to respect their picket lines returned to work, Bessie learned from a producer friend:

Jack Warner's convinced that you and Howard Koch were responsible for the strike. . . .

. . . that Blaney Matthews ("plant protection" director, that is, studio cop and Gestapo man) had a dossier on you that high; that he knew every meeting you went to, who came to your house, whom you visited and even had your telephone tapped.

. . . it was too bad you were the chairman of the Screen Writers' but they could get around that by waiting until your option comes up, then dropping it. . . .

. . . shortly before the first of January, [1946] my agent received word that the option would be dropped.¹⁰

Bessie had been an active participant in two previously successful strikes; the first had created the National Maritime Union, and the second had prevented the owner of the Brooklyn Eagle from publishing two functioning newspapers with the staff of one. But now, after the third strike, Bessie was out.

Bessie's departure from Warner Brothers took place almost simultaneously with the announcement that his original story for the film Objective Burma had been nominated for an Academy Award.

It was the kind of "B" picture dramatic irony in which the hero, after being rejected, wins the award and marches on to greater fame and glory. But this situation did not have the predictable formula ending. Bessie's story did not win the Award, and there was genuine concern over where his next job would come from.

In March, the anxiety was relieved, at least temporarily. Bessie received a contract from an independent production company to adapt a novel into a screenplay.

The entire job lasted about nineteen weeks, and the film was eventually made and released under another title, . . . but it did not have my name on it . . . for the simple reason that the producing company decided that the whole thing was simply "too radical."¹¹

A new screenplay was eventually written by two other writers, Gordon Kahn and S. K. Lauren. The film was made and released under the title, Ruthless.

He would not find another screenwriting assignment until December, 1946. The job, for Columbia Pictures, "which my agent had talked its producer into giving me because the story concerned Spain, and I was supposed to be an authority on Spain (as well as a writer)"¹² lasted just three weeks.

The job of finding screenwriting assignments is difficult, at best, for the free-lance writer, but the task was compounded when Bessie learned from his agent that "he was running into something called a 'list' on which I had apparently been placed."¹³ It was a portent of lists to come and perhaps, an indication, as well, of a fear that was growing in other areas of American life, too.

Early in 1946, a USSR spy ring had been discovered in Canada. Among those implicated were a number of key persons in the Canadian government. On April 12th, 1946, a year to the day after he had inherited the Presidency, Harry Truman's "Temporary Commission on Employee Loyalty" was created.

On January 2nd, 1947, an official Report of the House Committee on Un-American Activities carried the recommendation that Congress create "an independent commission with authority to investigate and to order the discharge of any employee or official of the federal

government whose loyalty to the United States is found to be in doubt."

On March 21st, 1947, President Truman issued Executive Order ~~9835~~⁹⁸³⁵, establishing a loyalty program for all civilian employees in the Executive branch of the United States government. That program would soon spread into all branches of the government, and its effects felt in all areas of life in the United States. It would produce such phenomena as "loyalty oaths," "blacklists," "security probes," "industry (and not only the motion picture industry) investigations," and, ultimately, the action of one junior Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph R. McCarthy.

An era of American history was being ushered in which many would compare with a parallel time, shortly after the end of World War I, which saw a national "Red Scare" and produced the notorious "Palmer Raids."¹⁴

In May, 1947, the House Committee on Un-American Activities turned its attention toward the Motion Picture Industry and publicly declared that it would explore and expose the amount and the depth of Communist infiltration in the production of motion pictures.

In Los Angeles, convening at the Biltmore Hotel, with Chairman J. Parnell Thomas and Committee member, John McDowell presiding, a sub-committee held a series of

closed hearings. In all, fourteen witnesses appeared and testified.

Speaking on his own, the Chairman announced that the Screen Writers' Guild was "lousy with Communists" and the government had wielded the iron fist in order to get the [motion picture] companies to put on certain Communist propaganda.¹⁵

Shortly after the closed hearings had adjourned, the sub-committee issued an indictment, based on what they had learned from the fourteen friendly witnesses:

scores of highly paid screen-writers were injecting propaganda into movies; White House pressure had resulted in the production of "the most flagrant Communist propaganda films;" subtle techniques were used for glorifying the Communist Party, while the Communists prevented the production of films which glorified loyal American citizens; the heads of the studios had done nothing to prevent all of this. Exposure was essential; public hearings were promised.¹⁶

The enemy was now clearly defined. The battle plan was ready.

In Hollywood, Alvah Bessie was struggling with a more fundamental and immediate problem: survival. In June, 1947, he received his last credited screenwriting assignment.¹⁷ The job called for him to adapt a story titled Smart Woman by author Adela Rogers St. Johns into a screenplay for actress Constance Bennett. Reflecting on the project, Bessie commented, "The story was a lulu, and I hope no one ever saw the film."¹⁸

If, indeed, the story and the resultant film had nothing to recommend them for a place in the annals of

motion picture history, the story of what took place during the development of the screenplay is not only relevant to this study but offers proof-positive of the cliché that "coming events cast their shadows."

In Bessie's original screenplay a scene takes place in the steam room of a Turkish Bath. Dialogue between a "crusading young special district attorney" and the corrupt District Attorney discloses that the younger man is about to ask for an indictment against his superior. When the District Attorney remarks, "You can't talk to me like that! I've been the District Attorney of this county for the past twenty years!", a character who has been part of the background atmosphere rises and accuses the District Attorney of having ignored him when he appeared in his office to lodge a complaint. When the District Attorney treats him with obvious disdain, he reacts, "I voted for you, but I can tell you this; I won't vote for you again, and neither will my wife or mother-in-law!"¹⁹ With that pronouncement, he strides out of the steam room.

The film's star's reaction to the scene was unexpected, and Bessie describes it in detail:

The star called in our producer and told him that this particular scene was one of the most vicious pieces of Communist propaganda she had ever read. He was baffled, so she elucidated.

She said what I had done was to discredit the elected representative of the people--the district attorney. The producer told her that the DA was

the heavy. She didn't care, she said; that character has to come out! If he comes out, said the producer, plaintively, you don't have a picture. The star still didn't care; she still insisted it was Red propaganda.

The producer . . . pointed out that so far from being propaganda, it was the oldest tradition in American politics: you treat me right or I don't vote for you.

The scene comes out, said the star.

. . . He pointed out to the star that I had not created that scene at all; it had come right out of the original story she had bought herself!

The star was adamant. The scene comes out, she said, and he goes off the picture.

So the scene came out, and I went off . . . 20

The 23rd of September, 1947, dawned hot. There was no predicted relief from the current heat wave. The temperature would reach over the 90° mark for the fourth consecutive day.²¹ The headlines of the Los Angeles Times informed its readers that huge crowds had turned out to witness an American Legion parade; that the city of Los Angeles was nearing the two million population mark and that a "robot brain" had piloted a plane over the ocean for more than eight hours. All in all, it was what could be called a "light news day."

For Alvah Bessie, there was the persistent and consuming problem of income. Where would the next job come from, and, more important, how soon? Whatever his thoughts might have been, they were interrupted by a caller. When he opened the door, a man inquired if he was Alvah Bessie. When he acknowledged the fact, the man

handed him a folded sheet of pink paper, and left. Bessie read:

By Authority of the House of Representatives
of the Congress of the United States of America
 To Robert E. Clark, United States Marshal
 You are hereby commanded to summon Alvah Bessie to be and appear before the Un-American Activities Committee of the House of Representatives of the United States, of which the Hon.

J. Parnell Thomas of New Jersey is chairman, in their chamber in the city of Washington on October 23, 1947, at the hour of 10:30 a.m. then and there to testify touching matters of inquiry committed to said Committee; and he is not to depart without leave of said Committee.

Herein fail not, and make return of this summons. ²²

At approximately the same time, 44 other members of the motion picture industry were reading their own subpoenas and deciding whether they would cooperate with, or defy, the Committee.

The brief month between the receipt of their subpoenas and the start of the hearings was filled with meetings with each other, their attorneys and plans for strategy. While there was a general unanimity among nineteen, at least, as to what their position would be, there were divergent, and sometimes clashing, opinions as to how that position could be most effectively presented.

. . . each of us individually consulted one of the attorneys and was advised of his constitutional rights. Each of us, therefore, had to decide what course of action he would follow, . . . Some of course were members of the Communist Party and some were not, but there was little agreement at first . . . between the party members themselves. Communists and non-Communists alike, some wanted to say, "Yes, I'm a Communist and what do you want to make of it?" Others wanted to say, "No, I'm not."

Some agreed that the best course of action was to challenge the Committee all the way down the line and not refuse to answer questions, but to answer them in their own way. Some suggested invoking the Fifth Amendment, but others insisted that they would have nothing to do with it because a refusal to reply on the grounds that any reply might tend to "incriminate and degrade" them was tantamount to a plea of guilty.

The lawyers pointed out there was nothing in the Fifth Amendment itself that implied such a confession, that the words "incriminate" and "degrade" do not even appear in the language of the amendment; but the consensus was no, and the ultimate decision agreed upon by all nineteen witnesses--was to strike at the very mandate of the Committee and its right to exist, which meant reliance on the First Amendment and the protections it offers to all citizens to speak, write, or assemble for any honorable purpose without fear of intimidation or reprisal.²³

In a full page advertisement, the witnesses put themselves on public record:

We propose to use every legal means within our power to abolish this evil thing which calls itself the House Committee on Un-American Activities and to put an end, once and for all, to the uncontrolled tyranny for which it stands.²⁴

On the night of October 19, 1947, the evening before the hearings began, a conference took place in the Shoreham Hotel in Washington, D.C. In his detailed account of the Hearings, the late Gordon Kahn summarized that conference:

The conferees were the attorneys for the nineteen men who by definition of the Un-American Activities Committee were the "unfriendly" witnesses, and the representatives of the motion picture industry.

. . . representing producers and studio interests. The producers' representatives were shown copies of the memorandum filed by the attorneys for the nineteen in which the authority of the Un-American

Activities Committee to issue subpoenas was challenged. . . .

Mr. [Robert] Kenny [one of the attorneys for the "unfriendly" witnesses] remarked, "The subject with which we are chiefly concerned is the character of the statements attributed to J. Parnell Thomas [Chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Activities] by the newspapers. He was quoted as saying that the producers had agreed to establish a blacklist throughout the industry."

Indignantly, Eric Johnston [President of the Motion Picture Association of America] answered, "That report is nonsense! As long as I live I will never be a party to anything as un-American as a blacklist, and any statement purporting to quote me as agreeing to a blacklist is a libel upon me as a good American." . . .

"Tell the boys not to worry, . . . there'll never be a blacklist. We're not going totalitarian to please the Committee."²⁵

With that assurance, and secure in the belief that both "unfriendly" witnesses and producers alike were united against a common foe--one who would dictate not only who should be employed in the making of motion pictures, but what the content of motion pictures should contain--the "unfriendly nineteen" rested secure in the belief that they were about to "fight the good fight," and regardless of what action the Committee might take, their own industry would certainly support them.

2

The Hearings

Shortly after nine o'clock on the morning of October 20, 1947, Chairman J. Parnell Thomas rapped a gavel, called for order and declared the House Committee on Un-American Activities to be in session. He climaxed

his prepared opening statement by stating, "The Committee is determined that the hearings shall be fair and impartial. . . . All we are after is the facts."²⁶

The producers took the witness stand first, and the first witness called was Jack L. Warner, Vice President-in-Charge-of-Production for Warner Brothers' studio. Warner, no stranger to the Committee, had been a witness during the preliminary closed hearings in Los Angeles six months earlier. He had "named names" of those employees, past and present, whom he believed to be Communists or subscribed to the Communist "party line," and injected, or had tried to inject, Communist propaganda into films. Now he was present to amend his earlier list, to remove several names he had previously listed, who, upon closer examination, had not been employed by Warner Brothers at all, and to name a few new names, as well.

Mr. Warner: When I say these people are Communists, as I said before, it is from heresay. It was from printed forms I read in the Hollywood Reporter.

Mr. Thomas: But you got enough information to let them go?

Mr. Warner: I could tell in their writings and method of presentation of screen-plays . . .

Mr. Stripling: [Committee Counsel] And you let these . . . people go. Can you name [them]?

Mr. Warner: Here are the names of people who in my opinion wrote for the screen and tried to inject these ideas, and I personally removed them. . . . The first one is Alvah Bessie. . . .

Mr. Stripling: Identify the films.

Mr. Warner: Alvah Bessie, The Very Thought of You . . .²⁷

As swift and sure as an executioner's stroke; the sure death of a career; the amputation of a livelihood. Whatever other forms of termination would follow; to social standing, to "respectability," and even to freedom, would be gratuitous--and far from swift.

One may well wonder why Alvah Bessie, with the fewest screen credits of any of the "Unfriendly Nineteen," appeared first on Mr. Warner's list. Was it for the obvious reason that Warner was simply reciting the names in alphabetical order; or was it that he was still chafing under the belief that Bessie, in 1945, had been one of those responsible for fomenting the strike-riot which had taken place in front of Warner Brothers' studio? Was there present in Jack Warner's thinking the logic that because he had hired Bessie away from an acknowledged left-wing periodical, the New Masses, he must be a Communist? Or did the knowledge that Bessie had been a member of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion during the Spanish Civil War influence his thinking and cause him to find un-American ideas and Communist propaganda in Bessie's

screenplay(s)? Or was it, perhaps, a combination of all those factors that caused him to pronounce, "The first one is Alvah Bessie. . . ."

Regarding other writers, Warner not only named them, and the pictures they wrote which he believed carried, or had attempted to carry, Communist propaganda, before he had dutifully excised it, but had gone into detail regarding their "tactics." Regarding Bessie, after mentioning his name twice, and the single film cited as containing Communist propaganda, he said no more.

The record and the Committee needed no more. As future events would prove, a man cited once was no less guilty than a man cited more often.

But two days later Bessie's name was spoken again. This time by one James K. McGuinness, a script supervisor for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios, and a founder of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals.

H. A. Smith, a Committee investigator asked him, "Mr. McGuinness, do you know who Alvah Bessie is?"

"Yes," McGuinness replied.

Smith: "Who is he?"

McGuinness said, "Alvah Bessie is a former movie critic of the New Masses who came to Hollywood, I think-- yes, in the employ of Warner Brothers. He was known

amongst writers I knew on the Warner Brothers lot as the Party's hatchet man."²⁷

McGuinness offered no explanation of what he meant by the term "hatchet man," nor what that job entailed. Neither was he asked. Apparently Bessie did not know either, for he asked his attorney, Robert W. Kenny:

Bessie: What's a hatchet man?

Kenny: (side of mouth) Somebody who kills people.

Bessie: (hot) But I never saw the man in my life.

Kenny: He didn't say he knew you.²⁸

In all, twenty-three witnesses appeared during the first week's session of the Committee hearings.

A review of the testimony up to that point showed that upwards of a hundred men and women, hitherto honorably identified with motion pictures, had been denounced. Professional organizations to which they belonged were characterized as incorporated conspiracies; or at least, as legions of "dupes."²⁹

The second week was the turn of the "unfriendly witnesses." The sessions began with attorneys Robert W. Kenny and Bartley G. Crum presenting an eight-point petition to quash the subpoenas of the nineteen witnesses. It is a document which states the complete position of the "unfriendly" witnesses. Reading it, one gains a clearer understanding of their case. I have included it in this study as Appendix A.

The Committee retired into executive session, considered the petition briefly, then returned to the

Hearing Room. Chairman Thomas informed attorneys Crum and Kenny and all the rest present:

No Committee of Congress has the right to establish its own legality or constitutionality. . . . a Committee of Congress cannot disqualify itself from the provisions of the law . . . We cannot set aside this law to suit the conveniences of certain witnesses or their counsel 30
. . . Mr. Stripling, the first witness. . . .

The first witness was screenwriter and playwright, John Howard Lawson, a founder, and first president of the Screen Writers' Guild. Lawson's political views were no secret, but in establishing a procedure which would be followed by the other nine witnesses called to testify, he refused to directly answer the two key questions asked by the Committee:

1. Are you a member of the Screen Writers' Guild?
2. Are you now, or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party of the United States?³¹

When asked if he might be allowed to read a prepared statement as the friendly witnesses had been permitted to do, he was refused.³² The rest of his time on the stand was occupied in a vain attempt to proclaim the illegality of the Committee. In turn, the Committee Chairman and counsel's attempts to get Lawson to answer their questions were equally futile. At last, Chairman Thomas ordered Lawson to "stand away from the stand," and directed the Capitol police to "take this man away from the stand."³³

After Lawson's removal, a nine page, single spaced document was read into the official record. That bill of particulars, according to counsel Stripling, contained "over one hundred exhibits showing Mr. Lawson's affiliations with the Party."³⁴

Next called was screenwriter Dalton Trumbo. The procedure followed much the same pattern as with Lawson, except for one notable exception. After being refused the privilege of making an opening statement, Trumbo attempted to introduce as evidence twenty screenplays he had written, "each of which ran anywhere from 115 to 170 pages."³⁵

"Too many pages," said Chairman Thomas.³⁶

That exchange has provided fuel for those who claimed (and who still maintain) that the Committee was not really interested in what the writers had produced, nor what they had to say, but solely desired to secure contempt of Congress citations against them as a gesture of intimidation toward the entire Industry.

A point overlooked by many writers who have produced works on the "Hollywood Ten" and the House Committee on Un-American Activities hearings is the little-known fact that Chairman Thomas in his concluding remarks said, "This hearing has concerned itself principally with spotlighting Communist personnel in the Industry.

"There is, however, an equally dangerous phase of this Industry which deals with Communist propaganda in

various motion pictures and the techniques employed."³⁷

He also assured all within hearing that a special sub-committee was being readied to explore and expose the amount of and methods of instilling Communist propaganda into Hollywood films. It was an investigation which never materialized.

After refusing to directly answer the questions regarding his affiliation with the Screen Writers' Guild or his membership in the Communist Party, Trumbo proclaimed that the Committee was violating his constitutional rights, and that asking him questions regarding his union affiliations "would permit you to haul every union member in the United States up here to identify himself as a union member, to subject him to future intimidation and coercion."³⁸ Trumbo then succinctly put the position of himself and his colleagues regarding that question:

This question . . . is designed to a specific purpose. First . . . to identify me with the Screen Writers' Guild; secondly to seek to identify me with the Communist Party and thereby destroy that Guild.³⁹

After refusing to tell the Committee whether he was now, or ever had been a member of the Communist Party, and protesting that he understood that "members of the Press have been given an alleged Communist Party card belonging to me," and demanding " . . . the right to be confronted with any evidence which supports that question," Trumbo was summarily excused.⁴⁰

As with Lawson before him, a "nine page, single spaced [record of] affiliations . . . with the Communist Party was entered into the record."⁴¹

Albert Maltz was the third "unfriendly" witness to be sworn in to give testimony. As with the two previous witnesses, Maltz, too, requested the privilege of reading a statement. As with Lawson and Trumbo, Chairman Thomas demanded to see the statement first. After examining it with his colleagues, Thomas, in a complete turnabout, announced, "Mr. Maltz, the Committee is unanimous in permitting you to read the statement."⁴²

Maltz read his complete statement. He was then asked, in what was becoming routine procedure, if he was a member of the Screen Writers' Guild. He refused to answer on the grounds that, "Any such question as that is an obvious attempt to invade my rights under the Constitution."⁴³

When asked if he was now, or ever had been, a member of the Communist Party, he responded, "Next you are going to ask me what my religious beliefs are."⁴⁴

When Committee investigator Stripling repeated the question, Maltz replied, "I have answered the question, Mr. Quisling. . . ."⁴⁵ Chairman Thomas excused Maltz from the witness stand with the comment that his testimony was "typical Communist line."⁴⁶

Predictably, a dossier containing Maltz's affiliations with the Communist Party was entered into the record.

"Mr. Alvah Bessie. --Alvah Bessie."⁴⁷

When your name is called, you are immediately afflicted by sensations you have experienced before: they are physiological in nature, and if you have ever tried to be an actor--or a soldier in action--you have experienced them often enough. They involve a suddenly stepped up heart beat, dryness of the mouth and throat, shaking hands, sharp pain in the intestinal region. And if you have ever tried to be a soldier (or an actor), you will immediately remember the next phenomenon: the moment you step onto the stage--or into the field of fire--the symptoms seem to disappear immediately, and you are just as suddenly at ease and in sharp command of all your faculties--such as they may be.⁴⁸

After the swearing-in formalities had been completed, Bessie addressed the chair, "Mr. Chairman, I also have a statement I would like to read to this Committee, would you like to examine it, or have me read it?"⁴⁹

Chairman Thomas told Bessie that he would be glad to examine it. Investigator Stripling asked him a group of preliminary questions to which Bessie responded in the affirmative. Then Bessie asked whether he would be allowed to read his statement, or not. After a few moments of discussion by the Committee, the Chairman addressed the witness:

Thomas: Mr. Bessie, while there is some doubt that your statement is pertinent to the inquiry, as will be evident when you read it--

Bessie: I would still like to have permission to read it--

Thomas: Just a minute. Nevertheless, the Committee is willing that you read the statement. We were just wondering, in order to save time, if you couldn't read the first couple of paragraphs and then we'd put it in the record at this point just as we did with the record of Mr. Maltz.⁵⁰

Quickly agreeing to the compromise, in what was the nearest thing to a victory he would secure that day, or any other, with the Committee, Bessie not only read the first two paragraphs of his statement but managed to include the last two, as well. His entire statement appears in this study as Appendix B.

Upon the completion of the last paragraph, Bessie was told by the Chairman, "Now Mr. Bessie, in accordance with our agreement, the whole statement will be placed in the record."⁵¹

Investigator Stripling then took over the questioning. After requesting him to "be responsive" in his answers to the questions that would be asked of him, it was established that Bessie was a) a writer, and b) that he had been employed, on and off, in the motion picture industry since January, 1943. Then Stripling asked the first of the two key questions:

Stripling: Are you a member of the Screen Writers' Guild?

Bessie: This is the same sort of question that was asked of other witnesses. It involves a question of my associations.

Stripling: Do you refuse to answer the question?

Bessie: I have not refused to answer the question, but I must answer the question in the only way I know how, and that is that I believe that such a question violates my right of association and . . . I do not believe it falls properly within the scope of this committee to inquire.⁵²

In an interview with Mr. Bessie on October 28, 1977 (ironically, 30 years to the exact day after he had appeared to testify before the Committee), I asked him the identical questions that Mr. Stripling had asked:

Zinnamon: Are you a member of the Screen Writers' Guild?

Bessie: I am a member of the Writers' Guild of America, West, of which the former Screen Writers' Guild is now a part, which I joined when I went to work for Warner Brothers studio in 1943, and of which I was a member at the time of the Committee hearings in 1947.

Zinnamon: Why, when the Committee investigator asked you, didn't you simply answer, "yes?"

Bessie: I agree with Dalton Trumbo, who, I feel, gave the definitive answer to that question. He said, "The question is designed . . . first, to identify me with the Screen Writers' Guild; secondly to identify me with the Communist Party and thereby destroy the Guild."⁵³

After Bessie had circumvented a direct "yes" or "no" answer to Stripling's question regarding his trade-union affiliation, the investigator turned to the second critical question:

Stripling: We will move on to the "sixty-four dollar question," Mr. Bessie. Are you now, or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?

Bessie: Mr. Stripling, and gentlemen of the Committee, unless it has been changed since yesterday, in our country we have a secret ballot; and I do not believe this Committee has any more right to inquire into my political affiliations than I believe an election official has the right to go into the voting booth and examine the ballot which has been marked by the voter. General Eisenhower himself has refused to reveal his political affiliations, and what is good enough for General Eisenhower is good enough for me.⁵⁴

On the audio recording of the hearings, laughter and applause punctuate Bessie's response (or lack of) to that question. Apparently unshaken by the reaction and unmoved by the reference to the General and his reluctance to reveal his own political preferences, Mr. Stripling reminded Bessie of the gravity of the situation in which he had been placed:

Stripling: Mr. Bessie, this Committee has officially found that the Communist Party of the United States is not a political party but is, in fact, the agent of a foreign government. I will ask you again: Are you now, or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?⁵⁵

Bessie then suggested that if Mr. Stripling had not understood his previous answer that he have the secretary read it back to him.

In my interview with Mr. Bessie, I asked him the same critical question:

Zinnamon: Mr. Bessie, are you now, or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?

Bessie: I have told any number of people, and I don't mind saying it again, I was for over twenty years a member of the Communist Party of the United States. When I was fighting in Spain I belonged to the Communist Party of the Spanish Republic also. And I was a member of the Communist Party when the subpoena came.

I have not belonged to the Communist Party since--I think it may have been 1953 or '54. I became gradually convinced, even before I went to prison in 1950, that this was a bankrupt organization in our country; that it had never learned to speak to the American people in terms that the American people understood. Its references were all foreign. The answer to everything was, "But in the Soviet Union . . . etc." Finally, I just announced to the people in the group, "I am not going to attend any longer because I don't feel this organization is getting anywhere in the United States. I don't see that it has learned anything from the lessons of history. I don't think it has learned anything from the whole period of Stalinism because it is still defending everything the Soviet Union does--no matter what it does.

In any event, I still consider myself a Marxist because everything I have learned about the world has convinced me a hundred times over of the correctness of the Marxist interpretation of history and society, and I firmly believe that most of the major problems of the world's people can be and will be ultimately solved by a truly democratic socialism, which will probably not be achieved in my lifetime.

Zinnamon: Why didn't you give that answer, or as much of it as was applicable in 1947, to the Committee investigator when he asked it of you?

Bessie: I will never answer that question, nor any other question, under duress; never as a condition of employment in my own country or any other country; never under a threat of loss of employment, status, of fine and/or imprisonment if I do not, and most certainly never, if my answer then demands my naming and placing in jeopardy of any kind, in any way, any other human being.⁵⁶

After Bessie suggested that Investigator Stripling may not have understood his answer, and suggesting that the secretary read it to him, Stripling replied with a statement which not only remains controversial to this day, but was made controversial because of inaccurate reporting, due, probably, to the high emotions the hearings were generating. I think it is worth looking into, if for no other reason than to graphically illustrate how a small distortion of fact may produce logical, but irrational, consequences.

Stripling: Mr. Bessie, there have been charges made before this Committee that you are a Communist. I didn't notice anywhere in your statement that you denied that charge. You are now being given an opportunity to deny that charge whether or not you are a member of the Communist Party. . . .⁵⁷

A no less distinguished journalist than the late Quentin Reynolds reported in the newspaper, PM, that what Stripling had really said was, "You have been charged with being a Communist."⁵⁸

Upon first reading, that may well seem like semantic nit-picking, the difference between what Stripling was

officially recorded as having said and what Reynolds reported him as "really" saying. But, if, indeed, Stripling had used the phrase attributed to him by Reynolds, a fine legal point would have been raised; for, in fact, neither Alvah Bessie, nor for that matter, any of the nineteen subpoenaed witnesses, had been "charged" by anybody with anything. They were subpoenaed to appear and testify as witnesses, not defendants. Had Stripling told Bessie that he was "charged with being a Communist," the very legality of the hearings would have been questioned by more than just the unfriendly witnesses, and quite possibly the whole business would have been terminated then and there.

But Stripling had not made the statement which Reynolds had misheard. He said, as has been correctly transcribed in the Committee hearing report, and as can be clearly heard in the audio recording of the hearing, ". . . there have been charges made before this Committee that you are a Communist. . . ."

Clearly, the Committee was on safe, if not particularly solid ground. But as may be inferred from Quentin Reynolds' inaccurate quoting, and from the Committee hearing records, those hearings had become, in essence, if not in point of fact, a trial. Whether or not that was the impression the Committee had intended to

produce, it was certainly the impression that was created, and which, to many, lingers to this day.

Bessie refreshed Stripling's memory of the fact that he had stated in the portion of the statement he had been permitted to read, that on these issues he stood on the Bill of Rights:

. . . and either the Bill of Rights means something or it doesn't; and if it doesn't mean anything, it is news to me, and I think it would be great news to the majority of the American people.⁵⁹

Investigator Stripling then requested Chairman Thomas to direct that an answer be given. Almost plaintively, Thomas said:

Mr. Bessie, in order to save a lot of time we'd like to know whether you are, or have ever been a member of the Communist Party. We'd like a very frank answer. Now you can answer "yes" or "no", or if you don't care to answer it, just say so.⁶⁰

Saying he had just given several answers, he was then accused of "following the same line as these other witnesses . . . which is definitely the Communist line," Bessie was then told he was excused and that "if you want to make a speech, just go out here under a big tree."⁶¹

Committee investigator, Louis J. Russell, was sworn in, "established" Bessie's membership in the Communist Party of the United States, and then told the Committee:

We have here a memorandum dealing with the Communist affiliations of Alvah Bessie. It is contained on seven pages and lists thirty-two separate affiliations.⁶²

After reading only nine affiliations, Chairman Thomas ordered the rest of it into the record unread.

Before the "memorandum" on Bessie's affiliations were read, Chairman Thomas addressed himself to his audacity at equating General Eisenhower with himself:

It is my belief that if General Eisenhower were a witness before this Committee and he was asked the question, "Are you a member of the Communist Party?" he would not only be very responsive to the question, but he would be absolutely insulted, and solely for this reason: A great man like General Eisenhower would not ever think or dream or stoop to ever being a low-down Communist. (Loud Applause.)⁶³

Then Thomas announced that the subcommittee had voted unanimously "because of the failure of Mr. Maltz and Mr. Bessie to respond to questions propounded of them, [to recommend] to the full Committee that Albert Maltz and Alvah Bessie be cited for contempt."⁶⁴

Chairman Thomas offered this reflection upon the four unfriendly witnesses who had already appeared:

There can be no doubt in anyone's mind who has attended these meetings that Mr. Lawson, Mr. Trumbo, Mr. Bessie and Mr. Maltz are Communists. They have been Communists for a long time and will continue to be Communists, serving not the best interest of the United States but the best interests of a foreign government.⁶⁵

It had taken just eleven minutes. And while there might be a future conviction on the contempt charge (there would be!) the cited, and soon to be cited, witnesses enjoyed the outspoken support of a percentage of those in the film industry, and the assurance of the President of

the prestigious Motion Picture Association of America that there would never be a blacklist. The support would quickly vanish, and the assurance of Mr. Eric Johnston ring hollow, if not openly mocking.

In order, over the next two days, witnesses Samuel Ornitz, Edward Dmytryk, Adrian Scott, Ring Lardner, Jr., and Lester Cole took the stand and refused to reveal their trade union and/or political affiliations.

In order, they, too, were cited for contempt of Congress.

On Thursday, October 30th, Chairman Thomas surprised all present with the announcement that the hearings were over, but assured (or, perhaps warned) all who might possibly be concerned that " . . . the Committee is not adjourning sine die, but will resume hearings as soon as possible."⁶⁶ (In fact, the next House Committee hearings regarding Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry would not take place until March, 1951.)

If Thomas' promise that the Committee hearings would be resumed could be construed as a possible warning to the Industry, then the statement made during his closing remarks could be construed as a direct one:

It is not necessary for the Chair to emphasize the harm which the motion-picture-industry suffers from the presence within its ranks of Communists who do not have the best interest of the United States at heart. The industry should set about immediately to clean its own house and not wait for public opinion to force it to do so.⁶⁷

Why the hearings, with another scheduled week to go, and another ~~ten~~^{eight} witnesses to be called, ended so abruptly never has been disclosed. Various critics have called it a tragedy or a farce. It was both. When asked the ultimate question, what did the hearings produce, the answer must be, it brought vilification and hardship upon ten previously respected members of the motion picture industry. It brought prison sentences, and rejection from their chosen professions. It intimidated the leaders of the film industry, and influenced the content of motion pictures for a number of years to come.

In her definitive study of film content, Communism and the Movies, ~~Miss~~^{Dorothy B.} Jones writes:

It was in . . . 1950-1952, that the most clear-cut change in the content of Hollywood films occurred. [The time of the most extensive House Committee investigation of the Film Industry] . . . characterized not only by more war films (of the sure-fire patriotic variety) but by fewer social theme movies, by a greater emphasis throughout the industry on what is sometimes called "pure entertainment"--and by a large number of anti-Communist films. . . . the years . . . can be described as a period when the industry radically reduced the number of social theme movies, and devoted itself to escapist fare of various kinds. And it was the period when the bulk of the anti-Communist films came to the screen.⁶⁸

While the Committee did produce "evidence" of Communist Party membership for eight of the ten, and Communist Party "affiliations" for all ten, they did not, at any time, present any evidence that "Communist propaganda" had appeared in any of the films authored or

directed by any member of "The Ten." But, perhaps, as I have quoted Chairman Thomas as stating, the hearings were concerned with "spotlighting Communist personnel in the industry." And that it certainly did.

In Hollywood, five hundred people, many of them important figures in the motion picture industry, formed the "Committee for the First Amendment." They took out newspaper and magazine advertisements, wrote and distributed pamphlets, participated in two one-hour, full-network, radio broadcasts titled Hollywood Fights Back, produced by radio's most distinguished writer-director, Norman Corwin.

These people made it plain from the start that they "espouse[d] no political party . . . represent[ed] no motion picture studios . . . and were not attacking or defending any individuals connected with the hearings," but were unalterably opposed to witch hunts, the House Committee and the investigation of The Industry.

. . . One would be hard put to find any important person in Hollywood's motion picture industry . . . who was missing from this list, which included four U.S. Senators, . . . Thousands throughout the country later supported the Committee for the First Amendment with their names and contributions.⁶⁹

In a letter to the author, Bessie makes a little remembered point about that Committee's stand:

People forget that the Committee for the First Amendment did NOT support us (in advance, and without knowing what we were going to say) so much as they opposed the [House] Committee's attempt to smear the Industry, which they knew it was going to do.⁷⁰

Now events escalated quickly. On Monday, November 24, 1947, The House of Representatives, in Session, by a vote of 346 saying "aye" as against 17 saying "nay," upheld the Committee on Un-American Activities' recommendation that the ten unfriendly witnesses be cited for Contempt of Congress.

The next day, November 25th, the Association of Motion Picture Producers meeting at the Waldorf Hotel in New York issued a statement. That statement, which has come to be known as the Waldorf Declaration, was brief, arbitrary and catastrophic. Because of its effect, not only on the now formally indicted "Hollywood Ten," but on the entire motion picture industry, it appears at this point, in full:

Members of the Association of Motion Picture Producers deplore the action of the 10 Hollywood men who have been cited for contempt by the House of Representatives. We do not desire to pre-judge their legal rights, but their actions have been a disservice to their employers and have impaired their usefulness to the industry.

We will forthwith discharge and suspend without compensation those in our employ, and we will not reemploy any of the 10 until such time as he is acquitted or has purged himself of contempt and declares under oath that he is not a Communist.

On the broader issue of alleged subversive and disloyal elements in Hollywood, our members are likewise prepared to take positive action.

We will not knowingly employ a Communist or a member of any party or group which advocates the overthrow of the government of the United States by force or by any illegal or unconstitutional methods.

In pursuing this policy, we are not going to be swayed by intimidation or hysteria from any source. We are frank to recognize that such a policy involves dangers and risks. There is the danger of hurting

innocent people. There is the risk of creating an atmosphere of fear. Creative work at its best cannot be carried on in an atmosphere of fear. We will guard against this danger, this risk, this fear.

To this end we will invite the Hollywood talent guilds to work with us to eliminate any subversives; to protect the innocent; and to safeguard free speech and a free screen wherever threatened.

The absence of a national policy, established by Congress, with respect to the employment of Communists in private industry makes our task difficult. Ours is a legislation to assist American industry to rid itself of subversive, disloyal elements.

Nothing subversive or un-American has appeared on the screen, nor can any number of Hollywood investigations obscure the patriotic services of the 30,000 loyal Americans employed in Hollywood who have given our government invaluable aid in war and peace.⁷¹

The Industry (at any rate that faction controlling the production of motion pictures) had, indeed, taken J. Parnell Thomas' suggestion (or implicit threat) to "clean its own house. . . ."

The problem of employment for "The Ten" has now been solved. Drastically. Thanksgiving Day, 1947, found Alvah Bessie and his nine "unfriendly" friends straining to find things for which to offer thanks. It was a condition which would not pass with the annual holiday season.

Aftermath

black-list /blak-list/ n;
a list of persons who are
disapproved of or are to be
punished or boycotted.
Webster's Seventh New
Collegiate Dictionary, 1971

The disapproval: The House Committee on Un-American Activities' recommendation to cite the ten "unfriendly witnesses" for contempt of Congress, upheld by the assembled House of Representatives vote (356 "aye," 17 "nay") to prosecute the witnesses on the charge.

The punishment: "one to twelve months in a common jail and . . . a fine of \$100 to \$1000."

The boycott: articulated by the Association of Motion Picture Producers' "Waldorf Declaration": "We will forthwith discharge or suspend without compensation . . . any of the ten until such time as he is acquitted or has purged himself of contempt, and declared under oath he is not a Communist."⁷²

Despite the amount, as well as the volume, of protest, most other areas of the motion picture industry quickly fell into line and supported such phenomena as loyalty oaths and blacklist procedures. Whether they took such action because they truly believed that they were exorcising an enemy dangerous to the Industry, in particular, and to the American people and free enterprise system,

in general; or because of intimidation, implied or explicit, are questions that can only be conjectured upon. But perhaps the very asking of them may help keep the same tragedy from being repeated.

What is not open to debate or conjecture are the unyielding facts that ten creatively talented men faced prosecution, fines and/or prison sentences (it would turn out to be both) for refusing to reveal their professional and political affiliations; faced the virtual impossibility of ever again finding employment in their chosen professions, plus a kind of stigma that would make it difficult, at very least, to find employment of any kind.

In January, 1948, "The Ten" flew to Washington, appeared in court, pleaded "not guilty" and flew back to Los Angeles.

On March 2nd, 1948, "The Ten" filed a collective suit against the studios for "breach of contracts, conspiracy to blacklist and damages for loss of employment."⁷³

The case would not be settled until January, 1952, at which time four of the major studios made out-of-court settlements totalling \$107,500. (The original amount sued for was \$47 million.) Now, the pressing problem was how to earn a living.

Alvah Bessie had already experienced the difficulty common to not-too-well-established screenwriters

attempting to find free-lance assignments. Now his difficulties were compounded by astronomical odds, and the law of diminishing returns was making itself felt keenly, as resources were being expended and no income to replace it seemed likely to be forthcoming.

Employment did appear, however, albeit from what Bessie considered an unlikely quarter; the man who had produced his last film.

He expressed his hatred of the Committee, his contempt for the cowardice of the "majors," his admiration for "The Ten" - and then he said, "Of course, I can't pay you \$600 a week."⁷⁴

It was a practice that was to become familiar to "The Ten:" the employment of quality talent to produce quality material for a wage considerably below their established salary. The men whose names had been placed on a detested blacklist found that they could only sell their wares on an equally detested black market.

During 1948, the same producer hired Bessie to write three screenplays:

The first job . . . involved "polishing" a screenplay and lasted one and a half weeks at \$500 a week. The second job, a brand-new screenplay, involved a "flat deal" of \$750 for four weeks work--or a reduction in pay from my "established" salary of \$600 to \$187. The third job, which he had told me was a little "brush-up" of a screenplay that would only take five days work, . . . I discovered it did not even have a story.

. . . It needed a story and a new screenplay, from scratch, for which I had agreed to a flat deal of \$400 and which I therefore completed in five days allotted me. And I refused at that time to do anything more for that gentleman.⁷⁵

In Inquisition in Eden, Bessie describes how a black-market sale worked.

This story was sold for \$5000 . . . through a typical black-market operation; another writer put his name on it; my agent took it to still another who had an "in" with a minor independent; the second writer pitched it to the producer; the agent came in to close the deal. The \$5000 was split as follows: \$1000 to the original independent, who had commissioned it, but didn't want to make it; \$500 to the agent; \$300 to the writer whose name was on it; . . . The film [release title, Passage West] was made while I was in prison.⁷⁶

^{"Original Story"}
~~Writing~~ credit was awarded to Nedrick Young, who was later to become a blacklist victim himself, although eventually he would win an Academy Award under the name Nathan E. Douglas for co-authoring the original screenplay of The Defiant Ones.

On April 21st, 1949, Jack Warner, Vice President in Charge of Production for Warner Brothers studios, and the man who had named Bessie first among those who had injected ideas which he "had deleted and for which he had fired me,"⁷⁷ was asked to indicate, for purposes of a lawsuit, the specific screenplays, and the specific dialogue he had excised.

In Inquisition in Eden, Bessie quotes a portion of Warner's deposition:

Q: What was written by Alvah Bessie, whose name you mentioned in that context, did you ever remove because you felt it to be un-American by any standard?

A: I would have to look to see what scripts and pictures he had worked on.

- Q: Prior to the time that you testified in May, 1947, had you actually made an examination of the scripts of Alvah Bessie to determine what you had deleted therefrom?
- A: I not only made--I made mostly the examination of the scripts and many times what we call the assembled film.
- Q: Is it your statement under oath at this time that you have, in fact, removed anything written by Alvah Bessie from either a screenplay or from a daily--
- A: (interrupting): - film itself.
- Q: (continuing): - film itself?
- A: Yes.
- Q: Because you decided or considered that content to be un-American?
- A: Yes, that is the reason. I personally--Yes, I removed things that I considered--
- Q: (interrupting) Things that were written by Alvah Bessie?
- A: I did, yes sir.
- Q: You are sure of that?
- A: If I said it, I undoubtedly--two years back . . . 78
- Later in the testimony, Warner was asked:
- Q: Then you will, sir, insert in the deposition that portion of the material written by Mr. Bessie in the picture The Very Thought of You which you deleted because you considered it to be subversive or un-American or harmful in some way to the motion picture industry? You will do that, will you?
- A: Not exactly harmful to the motion-picture industry and all that but harmful to the American public.
- Q: Well?

A: (interrupting): Yes, I will be glad to do that.
I said I would.⁷⁹

Of course, he has neither inserted in the deposition nor cited "that portion" at any time since, . . .⁸⁰

Although Jack Warner may not have been able to produce evidence of any Communist propaganda, or material "harmful to the American people" we once again turn to Dorothy B. Jones' essay, Communism and the Movies and discover:

. . . one film produced during the war years departed from the facts which it purported to portray beyond the point usually allowed by dramatic license and in a manner which was of political significance. This film, OBJECTIVE BURMA (Warners, 1945), was one in which coincidentally two of The Ten [original story, Alvah Bessie, and Academy Award nominee for that story, and screenplay co-author, Lester Cole] received writing credit. . . . The picture which according to the British viewpoint pictured Errol Flynn as winning the battle of Burma practically single-handed, was greatly resented in England. Finally it was withdrawn because of the adverse sentiment it aroused toward the motion picture industry in particular, and the United States in general. However, the distortion of facts in this film was to the disadvantage rather than to the advantage of the Communist Party and the Soviet Union at the time when this film was being written. And, therefore, this film cannot be regarded as containing Communist propaganda, even though, when it was released abroad after the close of the war, the film tended to stimulate unfriendly feelings toward this country on the part of Great Britain, and thereby may be said to have served the purpose of the Soviet Union.⁸¹

By late 1949, the situation in the Bessie household had become critical. The money that had come from the black-market jobs had been expended, " . . . there was literally nothing in the house to eat . . . and there were

bills that could not be paid. And there were no jobs to be had, either on the black-market or in any other market."⁸²

In Inquisition in Eden, Bessie cites two attempts to obtain funds: one concerns an effort to try to sell Charles Chaplin on the idea of filming Don Quixote. The second: an attempt to borrow \$500 from his old and good friend, the actor Lee J. Cobb. The first encounter ended with Bessie walking away with a \$100 bill pressed into his palm; the second--with a broken friendship.

Other events which would not only influence, but determine Bessie's future had been taking place:

Early in April, 1948, John Howard Lawson went to trial and on April 19th was found guilty, and given the maximum sentence for contempt of Congress--\$1,000 fine and one year's imprisonment.

One week later it was Dalton Trumbo's turn. He was likewise found guilty and given a similar sentence to Lawson's.

An appeal to the Appellate Court proved futile. A final appeal to the Supreme Court to review their cases was turned down by a six to two vote in June, 1950. Later in the same month the High Court refused to reconsider its earlier decision.

By the end of June, the other eight defendants, in what was actually a formality, since they had agreed in

advance that all the evidence and transcripts of the Lawson and Trumbo cases would serve as evidence in their cases, had been tried, convicted and sentenced.

"The Ten" had come to trial armed with hundreds of letters and a number of petitions with thousands of signatures requesting the trial judges to grant them probation on the grounds that they were all first offenders. They also brought with them offers of proofs of illegal, or, at best, extra-legal procedures of the Committee. All of these were ruled irrelevant.

While this thesis does not purport to be a legal or a political-science study in any aspect, I believe that insight is gained into what the Committee's true motives may have been, by examining those offers of proof. I have included them as Appendix C.

Whether those numerous and apparently substantive offers of proof could have been, in actual point of law, proved remains an academic question for students and practitioners of Constitutional law to debate and determine.

To the courts of law that tried Alvah Bessie and his nine co-defendants, the only relevant issues seemed to be:

1. Was there an investigation?
2. Was the man subpoenaed?
3. Did he appear?
4. Did he "refuse" to answer the questions?⁸³

For a possible understanding, if not an answer, to why the defendants' offers of proof had been summarily ruled irrelevant, perhaps a look at a bit of the history of the year 1950 may offer some of the possible motivations:

On January 25th, Alger Hiss, who had been indicted for perjury for having denied his Communist affiliations, and his alleged role in the transfer of State Department secrets to the USSR during the war, was finally, after his second trial, found guilty.

Exactly six months later, on June 25th, the Korean War began. Two days later, President Truman sent military aid to South Korea.

Earlier in June, members of an alleged spy ring accused of delivering atomic bomb information to the Soviet Union were arrested. It was the beginning of an episode in American history which would culminate in the executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, in 1953.

At the time of the convictions of "The Ten," the McCarran Internal Security Bill, which would require "all Communists and Communist dominated organizations to register with the Federal Government the names of all members and contributors" was gaining Congressional support, and, in a matter of weeks, would be passed into law.

On June 24th, 1950, in three separate courtrooms, before three separate judges of the Sixth District Court

in Washington, D.C., seven of the eight remaining unconvicted "Ten" heard themselves declared guilty of the charges brought against them. Five were sentenced to twelve months in a common jail plus a fine of \$1,000. Two (Herbert Biberman and Edward Dmytryk) received six-month sentences plus a \$500 fine. Producer Adrian Scott, recuperating from surgery in Los Angeles, would later be sentenced to twelve months, plus a \$1,000 fine, also.

After having been pronounced "guilty as charged," presiding Judge David A. Pine asked Bessie (as well as the other two defendants, Samuel Ornitz and Albert Maltz) if he had anything he would like to say. In a brief statement, Bessie reiterated the theme of "The Ten," that the House Committee had operated in violation of the law by addressing illegal questions to them. He went on to foresee the United States moving inexorably "toward a peculiarly native form of fascism."⁸⁶ He cited Henry David Thoreau, Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson as Americans who had taken unpopular positions on critical issues of their day, and, as a result suffered criticism and condemnation, but who had ultimately been vindicated by history. That entire statement appears as Appendix D.

They were remanded to custody immediately and began serving their sentences. Alvah Bessie was to spend the next ten months as a convict in the Federal

Correctional Institution in Texarkana, Texas, or as he termed it, "a political prisoner."

- - - - -

Many questions have been asked of "The Hollywood Ten" regarding the answers they gave, or declined to give, and why they chose to take the particular stand they did. In several tape recorded interviews, as well as in a voluminous exchange of written correspondence with Alvah Bessie, I asked him a number of the same questions he has been answering for the past 30 years, and with much patience, he answered them all, once--and sometimes twice--again:

Zinnamon: Why, if you truly believe that being a member of the Communist Party does not constitute a threat, real or implied, to the United States, and is not inimical to the interests of the American people, didn't you answer as Chairman Thomas directed, "Yes, I am," or "No, I'm not"?

Bessie: The attorneys convinced us, fairly convincingly, although we apparently have never been able to convince anyone since, that if you answer the first question you are then obliged to answer the rest of the questions; that if you say, "yes, I am, and so what?" the next question is, "Alright, what about John Doe?" If you then say, "I don't know about John Doe. I know nothing about John Doe's political opinions whatsoever;" they will then put on Joe Blow, of whom they have any number of such characters, who will say, "Of course, he knows whether John Doe is a member. He and Doe and I have attended any number of meetings together." Now,

Bessie: (cont'd.) it's your word against his, and as the attorneys pointed out, a refusal to answer puts you in danger of being in contempt of Congress, which is at most a thousand dollar fine and/or one year in a common jail, or both.

The idea, the lawyers said, is to stay out of jail, if possible. The idea is, also, not to give them a chance to catch you on a phoney perjury rap by producing somebody who can say, "but of course, he knows whether John Doe is a member, because I have attended meetings with both of them." In that case, you face the possibility of a perjury rap which is good for five years instead of one for the misdemeanor.

Zinnamon: Knowing the potential jeopardy of "taking the First" Amendment, as opposed to the protection offered to you under the Fifth Amendment, why did you opt for the First?

Bessie: We decided, after conversation with our attorneys, that we wanted to challenge the Committee's right to ask us the questions AND its very right to exist. This is the thing that has never been understood by the vast majority of the American public. As has been said to any number of us, any number of times, "Any American would be proud to stand up and say what he believes in." This is true if the saying thereof does not put you immediately in jeopardy of losing your job; or not being able to get another job; of losing your reputation in the community; of being ostracised; of having your children ostracised. The choices are very limited. One month to a year, or five years. Or without a job in either event, whichever position you took. So that is why we said, "we won't answer that question under duress."

Zinnamon: At this advanced date, with all of the hardship and deprivation that your decision to challenge the Committee created for you, do you still think that it was a good idea to have challenged the Committee's right not only to ask you the questions it did, but to exist?

Bessie: I think that it was a good idea. OBVIOUSLY, we did not get our point across to the right people and/or perhaps we didn't do it right. But I will contend--although I cannot prove it--that our challenge to the Committee's right to ask and/or even exist--not only helped to bring those hearings to an end very fast, but helped also to discredit the Committee and--ultimately--though God knows it took YEARS--helped to finish it off.

Zinnamon: When the Committee hearings began, there was much Industry support for the subpoenaed witnesses. That support quickly vanished. There has been much criticism that the openly hostile manner in which the witnesses conducted themselves was responsible for the withdrawal of much of the support. Your colleague and co-defendant, Albert Maltz, offered two other possible reasons:

"Repeated assertions that I was answering the Committee's questions instead of merely taking the position that the Committee had no right to ask me the questions, and I was refusing to answer them on Constitutional grounds. Since all of us did something like this it resulted in a certain confusion. . . . The witnesses . . . self-designated title 'The Unfriendly Nineteen' did themselves no good. For the phrase took on a sinister connotation. . . . From the public relations point of view, this has been an unfortunate title . . ."84

Do you agree with Mr. Maltz's evaluation?

Bessie: There has been much criticism of how we conducted ourselves; that we were disrespectful of the Committee--and we were; that some of us, Lawson and others, shouted at the Committee. I did not. Maltz made that crack to Stripling, "I have answered the question, Mr. Quisling." I loved it. We WERE belligerent. I know I felt belligerent. I WANTED to shout, but I didn't. I was as firm as I knew how to be and at points--inflection of voice, etc. somewhat nasty. But P/R wise, was it wise for ANY

Bessie: (cont'd.) of us to have been belligerant?
I don't know.

Zinnamon: Do you think the support you had would have vanished regardless of how you comported yourselves on the stand or by what name you might have called yourselves?

Bessie: Yes, I think the support we had--such as it was--would have evaporated the moment the hearing ended just as the Committee for the First Amendment dissolved under pressure from the Industry. The Producers also defended the Industry for a few days and offered to prove they never made a subversive picture.⁸⁵

While it may well be true, as Bessie claims, that the challenge of "The Ten," and the manner in which they mounted that challenge, helped to bring the 1947 hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities to an abrupt end, it turned out to be more of a respite than a conclusion. In 1951, the Committee would again turn its attention toward the Motion Picture Industry, and again, many would be subpoenaed, and, again, many would find their names on an Industry blacklist and their careers temporarily or permanently destroyed. But obviously they had learned from "The Ten" who had preceded them; those witnesses who chose not to yield to the intimidation of the Committee or the pressure of the Industry, safely, if not courageously, invoked the Fifth Amendment, and, at least, stayed out of prison.

What conclusions can be drawn from the 1947 hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities

regarding Communist infiltration into the Motion Picture Industry? These are several:

1. Those responsible for the Industry blacklist succeeded in creating that very "atmosphere of fear" which the Producers' notorious "Waldorf Declaration" said it would never create.

2. The blacklist offered "legitimate" employment only to those persons who would openly reveal their trade-union and political affiliations, and, if ordered, be willing to reveal directly the names of such persons whose affiliations might be suspect.

3. After the 1947 Hearings, the content of films produced in Hollywood changed appreciably. (The emergence of the formula anti-Communist plot.) Box office receipts fell noticeably. (Although how much of that had to do with film content and how much to do with the appearance of the new medium, television, is questionable.)

4. Ten creatively talented men were deprived of their livelihoods, sent to prison, suffered emotional wounds and financial setbacks, from which, for the most part, they have still to recover.

5. The black market, the attendant evil of the blacklist, produced a working example of one of the very worst phenomena indigenous to a profit-making system, and could only serve to reinforce whatever anti-Capitalist

(un-American?) beliefs may have been already held by those who were now forced to use that morally dishonest means in order to survive.

As the Producers had declared they would not create an "atmosphere of fear," and promptly created just that, so did the House Committee, which had declared it would expose "un-Americanism," prepare an atmosphere in which "Americanism" would take the form of a restrictive blacklist and an oppressive, highly exploitative black market.

In sum, I was not able to find a single redeeming quality either in the motives of the House Committee hearings, or the manner in which they conducted them. Neither was I able to find a single redeeming quality in the action of the Motion Picture Producers in instigating blacklists and loyalty oaths, although it is true that frightened men often do frightening things. And it is certainly true that the 1950's was a time of fear in America.

NOTES

¹U.S. Congress, House Committee on Un-American Activities, Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry, Eightieth Congress, First Session. Hereinafter cited as Motion Picture Hearings, 1947, p. 386.

²Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, p. 156.

³Robert Vaughn, Only Victims (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), p. 144.

⁴U.S. Congress, House Committee on Un-American Activities, Hearings Regarding the Communist Infiltration of the Motion Picture Industry, Eighty-second Congress, First Session, 1951. Part II, pp. 410-411.

⁵John Cogley, Report on Blacklisting, Vol. I, Movies (New York: Fund for the Republic, 1956), p. 49.

⁶Los Angeles Times, 7 October 1945.

⁷Ibid., 9 October 1945.

⁸Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, pp. 157-158.

⁹In 1946, the strike would recur, and once again violence would erupt.

¹⁰Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, pp. 157-158.

¹¹Ibid., p. 183.

¹²Ibid., p. 185.

¹³Ibid., p. 184.

¹⁴A. M. Palmer, U.S. Attorney General (1919-1921) initiated what were called the "Palmer Raids." Approximately 3,000 allegedly subversive aliens were rounded up for deportation. Although only several hundred were actually deported, a national "Red Scare" was produced.

¹⁵Walter Goodman, The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968), p. 203, citing New York Times, May 17, 1947.

¹⁶Ibid. Quoting Congressional Record, June 6, 1947, p. A2687.

¹⁷He would author several more screenplays, credited to other, non-blacklisted writers. In 1967, he would return to Spain to collaborate on a screenplay titled, España Otra Vez (Spain Again), and in 1974 adapt his novel, The Symbol for television.

¹⁸Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, p. 188.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 192.

²⁰Ibid., p. 193.

²¹Los Angeles Times, 23 September 1947.

²²Text of subpoena to appear before House of Representatives, House Committee on Un-American Activities.

²³Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, pp. 210-211.

²⁴Dalton Trumbo, Time of the Toad (New York: Perennial Library, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1972), p. 22.

²⁵Gordon Kahn, Hollywood on Trial (New York: Boni & Gaer, 1948), pp. 5-6.

²⁶Motion Picture Hearings, 1947, p. 3.

²⁷Ibid., p. 141.

²⁸Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, p. 222.

²⁹Kahn, Hollywood on Trial, p. 62.

³⁰Motion Picture Hearings, 1947, p. 289.

³¹Ibid. These key questions were asked of all the unfriendly witnesses, and provided the basis on which the ten contempt citations were issued.

³²All ten statements appear in full in Gordon Kahn, Hollywood on Trial; Robert Vaughn, Only Victims, and the official transcript of the Committee Hearings.

³³This action can be clearly seen in the film Hollywood on Trial.

³⁴Motion Picture Hearings, 1947, p. 296.

³⁵Gordon Kahn, Hollywood on Trial, 1948, p. 80.

³⁶Motion Picture Hearings, 1947, p. 332.

³⁷Ibid., p. 522.

³⁸Ibid., p. 332.

³⁹Ibid., p. 333.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 334.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., p. 364.

⁴³Ibid., p. 366.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid. Vidkun Quisling was a Norwegian fascist leader who aided the Germans in the conquest of Norway. In 1942, the Nazis appointed him premier. After the German surrender in May, 1945, Quisling was arrested, convicted of high treason and executed.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 367.

⁴⁷A sharp, metallic sounding voice, heard clearly on the audio recording of the Hearings.

⁴⁸Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, 1965, p. 234.

⁴⁹Motion Picture Hearings, 1947, p. 383.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid., p. 384.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Tape recorded interview with Alvah Bessie, October 28, 1977.

⁵⁴Motion Picture Hearings, 1947, p. 386. (In 1947, General Eisenhower was being courted by both major political parties for the Presidential nomination in 1948. The General coyly refused to reveal where his political affiliations lay.)

- ⁵⁵Ibid.
- ⁵⁶Taped interview, October 28, 1977.
- ⁵⁷Motion Picture Hearings, 1947, p. 386.
- ⁵⁸New York (New York) PM, 29 October 1947.
- ⁵⁹Motion Picture Hearings, 1947, p. 387.
- ⁶⁰Ibid., pp. 387-388.
- ⁶¹Ibid.
- ⁶²Ibid., p. 394.
- ⁶³Ibid., p. 402.
- ⁶⁴Ibid.
- ⁶⁵Ibid., p. 402.
- ⁶⁶Ibid., p. 522.
- ⁶⁷Ibid.
- ⁶⁸Dorothy B. Jones, "Communism in the Movies," in Report on Blacklisting, Vol. I., Movies, John Cogley, ed. (New York: The Fund for the Republic, 1956), pp. 219-226.
- ⁶⁹Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, pp. 211-212.
- ⁷⁰Letter: Alvah Bessie to Jerrold Zinnamon, 24 January 1978.
- ⁷¹Statement of the Association of Motion Picture Producers, 25 November 1947, cited by Gordon Kahn, Hollywood on Trial (New York: Boni and Gaer, 1948), pp. 184-186.
- ⁷²Ibid.
- ⁷³Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, p. 254 (fn).
- ⁷⁴Ibid., p. 255.
- ⁷⁵Ibid., pp. 255-257.
- ⁷⁶Ibid., p. 257 (fn).

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 253.

⁷⁸In the Supreme Court of the State of California, in and for the County of Los Angeles. Deposition of J. L. Warner, taken on behalf of the plaintiffs, April 21, 1949, cited by Alvah Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, p. 253.

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 254.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Jones, Report on Blacklisting, Vol. I, The Movies, pp. 212-213.

⁸²Ibid., p. 264.

⁸³Ibid., p. 279.

⁸⁴Albert Maltz, quoted by Stefan Kanfer, Journal of the Plague Years (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 99.

CHAPTER V

ALVAH BESSIE - "un-AMERICAN"

Bessie: Sir, in my opinion
I'm a political
prisoner.

Huber: Bessie, we don't
have political
prisoners in the
United States.¹

1

Prison

Alvah Bessie and Herbert Biberman served their prison terms in the Federal Correctional Institution in Texarkana, Texas. While the very nature of imprisonment not only inhibits, but is actually designed to prevent any form of mass communication, it did provide much interpersonal communication, and a testing of the principles and philosophy Bessie had established and reinforced for himself over the preceding fifteen years. Proceeding, then, on the theory that understanding the artist is important to understanding his work, Bessie's year in prison is worth reviewing.² For that information, I will look closely, and often, at his own account of his experience, as he recorded it in his book, Inquisition in Eden.

Imprisonment began in the Washington District Jail. For eleven days he was confined with a cellmate from Albania who spoke no English, nor any of the other languages in which Bessie is conversant. His efforts to make contact using ". . . my seven words of German, my rusty college French, my creaking Spanish and four words of Italian were to no avail."³

With nothing to do but sit, and no place to go but inside his own mind, Bessie returned to a form of expression he had not employed since he had been in college more than a quarter of a century before: poetry.

In a poem beginning, "Over in the District Zoo," he tellingly describes the boredom and hopelessness of prison existence.

~~Over in the District Zoo~~

Over in the District Zoo

the beasts revolve in their cages day and night
and, I, who am a lover of animals, remember them
with pity:

the Bengal tiger with his deadpan stare,
in geometric patterns, back and forth,
rubbing his right flank on the bars. The polar bear
in the heavy heat of Washington's summer
(stir crazy) who reverses gears, walks backward
once his snout has touched the opposite wall . . .

The PA system speaks: "Hear this, now hear this"--
(through every speaker perched at each small cell)--

"Attention all units: make your 7:45 count."

Attention all units: make your 7:45 count."

This is our day of freedom; this day we said:

"We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .

All men are created equal . . . they are endowed,"
we said, "with life, liberty . . ."

(The guard counting . . . "12 . . . 14 . . . 16"
as he paces down the range.) That day the bars

rolled back (automatic electric?), the gaol doors swung on rusty hinges, and ragged mechanics and stocky yeomen stood in the cobbled streets and cheered. ". . . and the pursuit of happiness!"

All night there were voices in the place . . .

"Attention all units: the count is clear."

That means: all present or all accounted for; each man in place; a place for every man:

the alcoholic (in for ten days, out for two; in for thirty days and out for one; in for sixty days--); the thief: four counts of armed robbery,

"I said,

'Gimme back my gun an' my false nose:

they're the tools o' my trade'";

the signers of bad checks, the "lewd molest,"

the statutory rapists, and the peddlers of dope;

the con man from Santa Monica who said:

"I saw Betsy Grable lots of times";

the derelict who brained the flophouse owner

with a baseball bat: "It's a good thing I did,"

he said; "That guy was no damn good at all;

Took men in and robbed them of their dough

And threw them out into the wilderness of Ninth Street";

The alien who made the sad mistake

of watching a car for a man and being nabbed

for stealing it; the Mexican (called amigo here)

who kissed a girl fourteen (she looking twenty):

"rape," reduced when she was found intact

to "indecent liberties" and deportation (natch).

The Negro lad (called nigger here)

condemned to die this morning: only yesterday

I asked if he could play piano, and he said:

"If I could play piano, man,

I'd be invulnerable to sorrow."⁴

Bessie and Biberman were taken by automobile from Washington to Texarkana, Texas. It was a trip that took three days, handcuffed together most of the time. Bessie describes the trip as one during which Biberman did not talk but lectured for the entire three-day journey.

He sat on the edge of his seat and instructed the marshal and the dick from Sherman, Texas, relating to them the history of our case and its importance, from the standpoint of constitutional law. He told

them how motion pictures were made and detailed the relationship between the creative artist and management.

He gave them, in slightly oversimplified but relatively cogent (and generally accurate) terms, the history of the American Revolution of 1776, the French Revolution of 1789, the second American Revolution (1861-1865) and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

I lay in the back seat of the . . . car trying to go to sleep. Every once in a while, the marshal . . . would glance over his shoulder and say, "How you doin', Bessie?" I would open one eye and say, "I'm alive."⁵

The trip was reduced to minimum discomfort by the marshal's permission for Bessie to smoke; to allow both men to eat in restaurants, unshackled, and not to be fettered with leg-irons, all in violation of established regulations regarding the transportation of prisoners.

Upon arriving at Texarkana, they were immediately placed in quarantine with the other newly arrived convicts. Upon release, Bessie was given an identification card which certified he was a "trustee," and learned that his job would involve pumping gas in the prison garage.

. . . which was outside the gates of the institution and serviced the cars belonging to the officers and the trucks and tractors that were used to work the seven hundred acre farm surrounding the main buildings.⁶

Bessie and Biberman had been cautioned that it would not be wise for them to express any of the revolutionary theories they may have held, as most of the inmates were highly patriotic and might resent it.

Bessie was surprised to find that a general air of friendliness greeted Biberman and himself. He found another element as well. One, perhaps, he may have been unconsciously seeking.

Patriotic they may have been, though I never saw any evidence of it. . . .

Class conscious (in a backhanded manner) they certainly were, for they were all convinced (and not without reason) that the free world was against them, the cops were against them, the courts were against them--and anyone the government was against, they were for . . .⁷

But the rapport with the other prisoners, such as it may have been, was not forthcoming with Biberman. While they were still in "quarantine," the tensions had already begun to develop. Although they may have been philosophically akin, they differed as to political tactics, and Biberman criticized Bessie for his behavior on the trip from Washington.

"You missed a great opportunity there."

"What opportunity?"

. . . "When the Marshal or detective turned to you and asked, 'How are you, Bessie?' you lay back in the seat and moaned, 'I'm alive.'"

. . . "Are you under the impression that anything you said to those cops had any effect on them?"

He shot to his feet and stood erect. "Of course."

"Listen, Herbert," I said, "in my opinion, I'm in the hands of the enemy. In such a situation, my obligation is to be a gentleman, say 'yes sir' and 'no sir,' or keep my mouth shut. That's what I'm doing."

"Look at you!" said Herbert, pointing at me. "You don't stand up straight. You lean against the wall! You fall into a chair and lie in it. I find you physically repulsive."

We didn't speak to each other for a few weeks after that, . . .⁸

Several months later another quarrel was to erupt.

This time over the actions of another of "The Ten."

The newspapers carried a story about Edward Dmytryk, who had issued a statement through his attorney, . . .

In that statement, Dmytryk said, in effect, that he had made a sad mistake, that his country was at war . . . and, "my country right or wrong."

I blew my cork and cursed Dmytryk, saying that he hoped to shorten his six-month sentence and predicting that he would become a renegade. Herbert became livid with rage.

"You don't know what you're talking about!" he shouted.

"He may be weak . . . but Eddie will never go over to the enemy! You don't know him. You show no understanding of people whatsoever when you say a thing like that!"⁹

Bessie would experience other emotionally-charged moments. One involved an outspokenly anti-Communist guard--his supervisor when Bessie drove a truck for several months. He had served in the Army in Germany in World War II, and Bessie asked if he had ever run into a man named Joe Hecht, who had also served in Spain. The guard said, "sure," and when Bessie was skeptical, described Hecht to perfection; then went on to express his admiration for the man--a gentleman, a brave soldier, a generous comrade who shared all his packages with his fellow "G.I.'s." When Bessie asked if the guard had known that Joe was killed, the man was appalled--and grieved. He was killed saving his squad from Nazi machine-gun fire, for which he was decorated--posthumously. The guard was genuinely shaken and Bessie (although not calculatedly, perhaps) scored a point for Communists, if not Communism,

when he asked if the guard had known Hecht was a Communist. The man's jaw dropped. He said, "If he was a Communist, then--" and prudently silenced himself.

Bessie also made other discoveries in Texarkana. Some of them having to do with the very penal system under which he was serving time.

It is a tragic fact that large numbers of prisoners, who almost invariably come from the poorest levels of our population, are also high-powered neurotics when they are not actually psychotic; and just as they receive no occupational rehabilitation worthy of the name, neither do they receive any psychiatric treatment.¹⁰

He had the chance to discuss his views with the prison warden. Regarding the prison officers, Bessie complained, "The officers don't seem to give a damn about the men, how they came to be here, or what's going to happen to them when they get out. . . . In my opinion, they're a pretty crummy bunch of human beings."¹¹

The warden then made a startling admission--to an inmate: "When you pay the kind of wages these men get, you don't get very high class men." When Bessie went on to criticize the rehabilitation system, or the lack of it, the warden responded with the same frankness, "What rehabilitation system? . . ., there's no interest in this country in rehabilitating prisoners."¹²

In addition to learning that there was no interest in rehabilitating prisoners, Bessie also learned that there was no interest in granting him the parole he had

petitioned for, despite the fact that the Supreme Court had recently reversed a judgment for contempt for those refusing to answer questions relating to membership in the Party.

The Court had ruled that such questions violate the privilege against self-incrimination, whether or not the defendant raises the privilege in the "correct" legal terminology or not.¹³ For the "Hollywood Ten" that decision had come too late. In addition to having his parole appeal denied, his truck driving job ended, too, and he was made a clerk in the same warehouse in which Biberman was working.

The day that Biberman was released (he had received a six-month sentence only), he disclosed some shocking information to Bessie:

"... I'm terrified of what may happen to you after I'm gone."

"... Alvah, the men here hate you!"

"... , they loathe you! Any number of them have said to me, 'what's the matter with that guy, anyhow? ... What's eating him that ain't eating me?'"

I was struck dumb. . . . I was not only struck dumb, I was terrified-- I was so terrified-- and so bewildered by having seen no indication whatsoever that the other men loathed me--that I did not go out in the yard for the next two days . . .¹⁴

When Bessie did finally venture out of his cell, he discovered from Biberman's former cellmate information that relieved his terror, but left him even more bewildered. He learned that it was not he whom the other prisoners

"loathed" but, because of his manner with both guards and fellow inmates, Biberman! Why Biberman assumed it was Bessie whom they despised, Bessie does not explain, if, indeed, he ever knew.

In April, 1951, with two months off for "good behavior" Bessie was released from prison. He returned to Los Angeles, his family, and the overwhelming problem he had left, finding employment to support himself, his wife and his children. He could write of his prison experience, "Who knows not prison, knows not liberty."¹⁵

2

The Wilderness Again

To what kind of liberty had Alvah Bessie returned? He had (to lean on the cliché) "paid his debt to society," but the society to which he belonged, or, perhaps more accurately, from which he had been expelled, was now even less likely to welcome him in its ranks than it had been at the time of his imprisonment.

Shortly before his release from prison, The House Committee on Un-American Activities once again turned its attention to the Motion Picture Industry. These hearings, while they would send no one to jail, would result in blacklisting even greater numbers of those employed in areas of film-making. The environment of fear would be intensified. Many would appear before the Committee and

openly (and some in secret session) admit their own Communist Party affiliations and go on to list all of those whom they knew (and in many cases, merely suspected) were Communists.¹⁶

While it had been difficult for Bessie to find even black-market screenwriting jobs prior to his going to jail, now it was literally impossible. In addition to the fear that gripped many producers that even the sub-rosa hiring of a black-listed writer would be discovered, there exists the even more cynical likelihood that there now existed an even greater pool of black-listed, and more established (although not necessarily more talented) talent than Bessie from whom to choose. It would follow then and not illogically, that the producer who would deliberately hire a black-listed writer for a fee well below his established salary would consider himself getting an even greater bargain (as well as a higher calibre of talent) by hiring a thousand dollar a week writer for four hundred rather than employing a six hundred dollar a week man at the same price.

Desperation turned him to a short-lived attempt to sell encyclopedias. He discovered that there was even a kind of exploitation that went with that job:

Much to my dismay, I discovered that rather than attempt to sell it to people who could afford it, it was a practice to call on people who couldn't afford it, namely Mexican-Americans and other working class people out in the San Fernando Valley,

who desperately wanted their children to have the cultural advantages of owning the encyclopedia, therefore I decided not to go out and try to sell the damn thing.¹⁷

A tentative offer to sell foreign automobiles also got nowhere:

I thought it might be easy to do; that I could go to any number of well known stars that I knew, and out of their feeling of, "There but for the grace of God goes me," they would buy a Rolls-Royce, or almost anything to get rid of me. However, the man who offered me the idea changed his mind. He felt it would be bad publicity to employ a character like me. He was probably right.¹⁸

Following those two abortive efforts, Bessie then wrote to "every trade union in the country I could think of."¹⁹ The results were uniformly disappointing.

Then I got a phone call from Morris Watson, who was then the editor of the Dispatcher [the newsletter of the ILWU, International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union] who said, "Come up here next week. We have a job for you."²⁰

"Up here" was San Francisco. The job, assistant editor and assistant public relations man for the ILWU. Bessie's employment problem had been solved. The acceptance of the job in San Francisco meant the end of a stormy seven and a half year period as a contract and free-lance screenwriter, excluding ten months as a prisoner in the Federal Correctional Institution in Texarkana, Texas. Bessie would not receive another screenwriting credit for the next seventeen years, and then it would come in a country not his own, but yet, one very much his own.

How may we evaluate those crucial seven and a half years in Alvah Bessie's life? During that time he came into brief contact with the highest rewards the film industry has to offer, and just as it seemed those rewards were about to multiply, he suddenly found himself unemployed and "officially" unemployable. Not only had the high salary and other comforts vanished, but he had become "unrespectable," as well; an enemy of his country, a victim of its panic, and, in point of fact, a prisoner of it. The very system that had so recently seemed ready to offer such heaping blessings, now inflicted its two cruelest punishments: economic deprivation and social ostracism.

If Bessie had already developed strong feelings against the inequities and oppressive nature of the Capitalist (or "Free" Enterprise) system (which he frankly admits he had) then his direct confrontation with both those factors could only serve to reinforce and intensify the Marxist theories and philosophies he had adopted.

Those confrontations with a) the House Committee on Un-American Activities; b) existence in the Texas prison to which he had been sentenced; c) the ruthless exploitation he found in the Motion Picture Industry; and, d) the cataclysmic effects of the Fascist government in Spain, which he had fought to save from that fate thirty

years before, make up the themes of his next four works: The un-Amreicans; Inquisition in Eden; The Symbol; and Spain Again.

They are worth examining from the point of illustrating how Bessie's political and social philosophies influence his work. In three out of the four above-named books, a surface reading reveals those elements. The Symbol, perhaps, needs deeper scrutiny, as the various critiques will indicate.

The methodology employed in the following section is to indicate briefly the novels' plots and the non-fiction books' themes, then to present a number of reviews of each work, favorable and unfavorable alike, without any personal evaluation, in order to maintain a sense of objectivity.

3

The un-Americans

Bessie's position with the ILWU Dispatcher lasted just one month short of five years. During that period he wrote his third novel, The un-Americans. It was published in 1957, after Bessie had left the Dispatcher, and found employment as a stage-manager, lightman and announcer for a local San Francisco night club.

As Bessie's first non-fiction book, Men in Battle, had told the story of the men of the Abraham Lincoln

Battalion and their direct fight against the forces of Fascism during the Spanish Civil War, The un-Americans is the story of two men, also in battle against the forces of Fascism, not only in Spain but in their own country. Not only do the two men battle Fascism, but the warring contradictions in their own particular natures as well. The action of the novel is played out, chiefly, in Spain, in combat against the Falangist forces of Francisco Franco, and in New York, in combat, against the House Committee on Un-American Activities Committee, or as Bessie has stated elsewhere, "another engagement in the same struggle."²¹

Briefly, the story is centered on two men, both newspaper correspondents, who meet in Spain while covering the Civil War. The protagonist, Ben Blau, is a reporter for the left wing paper, the Daily Worker. He feels the struggle against Fascism and the cause of the Spanish people so intensely, he enlists in the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, and on his return to the United States joins the Communist Party.

The novel's other principal character, Francis Xavier Lang, is a much more successful journalist, a playwright, and an intimate of persons in high places, including the President of the United States. Like Blau, he feels deeply the cause of Republican Spain. While he does not enlist in the International Brigade, he, too,

after returning home, becomes a member of the Communist Party, but it is only a brief liaison. Later he is instrumental in helping Blau find a publisher for his book, Volunteer for Liberty.

During World War II, Blau serves in the U.S. Army, saves a detachment from annihilation, is seriously wounded and receives a medal for his heroic action. Lang also joins the Army, as a combat correspondent, and in a public-relations capacity. He achieves the rank of Major, and for his contributions is awarded the "Legion of Merit."

After the war, Lang's fame continues to grow. He becomes a successful playwright and motion picture screenwriter, writes a syndicated newspaper column, is contracted to a major radio network and performs a weekly news commentary broadcast.

Blau, on the other hand, returns to his reportorial position on the Daily Worker.

The novel climaxes in the late 1940's when both men are subpoenaed to appear before the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

Because of his own inherent weaknesses, i.e. his fear of returning to the condition of poverty from which he emerged, the value which he places on his material possessions and his social status, as well as pressures put on him from various powerful forces, cause Lang to

become a "friendly witness" and implicate Blau in his testimony.

Blau refuses to answer the Committee's questions and is not only cited for contempt of Congress but is actually indicted and tried for perjury. The novel ends as Blau, in prison awaiting the verdict of his trial, is attacked by another inmate, and on a technicality is about to be released from jail, only to face retrial.

While The un-Americans is in large part an altered story of Bessie's own history in Spain as well as Hollywood, Washington and prison in Texas, there are certain departures. The protagonist does, in his perjury trial, reveal his Communist Party affiliations, although he refuses to name anyone else.

"It seems to me profoundly dishonorable and un-American to name other people who may very easily . . . be subject to harassment, loss of employment and public contempt, or even prosecution." . . .

"For myself and my own reasons, I've answered the so-called Sixty-Four Dollar Question. But it seems to me that the question is more than, 'Are you now, or have you ever been?'

"It's much more than the right all Americans possess to belong to any organization, associate with any person or group, speak or write or publish any idea that may come into their heads.

"It's become a question of love or hatred. It's become the unresolved question of democracy or fascism--in our own country, here, now, today.

"To my mind, it's the unresolved equation between world war and world peace. It is now a question of life or death. And it is in this sense and for these reasons that I say I will not put the finger on any of my comrades, who are as innocent of any offense against the American people as I am myself."²²

In a brief passage at the very end of the novel, Blau/Bessie sets down this meaningful dialectic of interpersonal and intraclass relationships:

No man can truly love his fellow man (his class) until he can have a complete relationship with another human being. And, by the same token, no man or woman can have a complete relationship with another human being until he loves his class. These are opposites. They are also identical.²³

The un-Americans was published early in 1957. The critical reaction to the novel fell into two predictable areas. The leftist press generally hailed the book as:

. . . slashing political journalism coupled with poignant scenes evoking the atmosphere of Spain in the thirties. The sections which depict the operation of the House Un-American Committee are particularly compelling, both for their force and their indisputable authenticity.²⁴

Michael Gold, one of the best known, and for many years one of the most outspoken, voices of the left, wrote in his column, Change the World! in the May 25, 1957 edition of the daily People's World:

In his magnificent new novel, The un-Americans, . . . Alvah Bessie has created a full length portrait of what really happened to Americans facing those fateful decades of war, fascism and McCarthyism . . .

. . . his book is more than a social document. It is a moving tale of real human beings sweating out their earthly terms in this troubled epoch of the great wars and social revolutions.

It is a triumph of the story telling art. . . . ²⁵

The "establishment" press was somewhat less enthusiastic. In the April 28, 1957 edition of the New York Times, one R. L. Duffus reviewed the novel in a full

column article titled, Apologist for Tyranny. While Mr. Duffus expresses his agreement with those who supported the "Loyalist Government in Spain," and with those who "may still share . . . a lack of respect for some Congressional Committees," Mr. Duffus cannot understand "how a sane man can argue, as Mr. Bessie makes his leading character do, against tyranny in Spain and in favor of tyranny in Moscow." He ends his article by accusing Bessie of " . . . a sickening sense of moral blindness in this presentation of a man's confused and slavish conformity."

In the June 1, 1957 issue of the Saturday Review an unsigned review dismisses the novel briefly as " . . . shot through with sentimental martyrdom, bilious political palaver, and a distortion of values that is fascinating for its own misguided sake."

In November, 1957, The un-Americans was published in Great Britain. As in the United States, the reviews were mixed. The Queen called it "a simply terrifying novel . . . told with shocking and yet fascinating power, and a masterly appearance of truth. You must read this."²⁶

The Sunday Times on December 22nd carried a two-column review signed by one John Metcalf who referred to the novel as "A windy squint-eyed snarl of a book . . . lurching out of the American corner with its fists cocked

. . .

" . . . The interest lies not so much in the writing as in the fact that it was published in America at this time."

In the July 7, 1960, issue of the British literary magazine, John o' London's, a rather belated review of The un-Americans appeared, written by critic Harry Hearson. His brief summary of the novel concludes with this ringing sentence. "So long as America has writers of the intellectual honesty of Alvah Bessie, so long can she be sure that man's inhumanity to man will not be permitted to go unrecorded and undammed."

In 1961, The un-Americans was published in Czechoslovakia, and was well enough received to go into a second edition in 1964. But it was in East Germany that the novel had its greatest success. Published originally in 1959, it went into a second edition in 1962, and in 1967 was reprinted for the third time in a paperback edition. In 1958, a Spanish language edition was published in Argentina (copies of which, Bessie discovered, had been smuggled into the Burgos prison in Spain). In 1962, it appeared in Bulgaria and the Soviet Union.

While foreign distribution was wide and sales were heartening, American sales were disappointing. The novel's European success brought forth an adaptation by Bessie into a 90 minute radio drama that was produced by

the British Broadcasting Corporation on December 24th, 1964, and sometime later by the New Zealand Broadcasting Corporation.

In 1973, a Czech language television adaptation was carried by Czechoslovak Television.

In 1974, the German Democratic Republic radio--TV network Deutscher Fernsehfunk--produced an hour-long radio adaptation of The un-Americans.

Although the international exposure of The un-Americans had been wide and its adaptation into radio and television successful, Bessie could find no interest in his screenplay--nor in himself--from any American producers. It was obvious that, for him, the blacklist had not lightened nor lessened.

4

Inquisition in Eden

The years following Bessie's release from prison had been a period of readjustment, not only personally, but professionally, and, in a sense, ideologically:

* In 1954, Bessie resigned his membership in the Communist Party of the United States.

* In 1955, Bessie's second marriage, as had his first, ended in divorce.

* in 1956, Bessie's job as Assistant Editor of the ILWU's house organ, the Dispatcher, and assistant

publicity man came to an end, due principally to that union's growing financial problems.

His next job was for a San Francisco night club where he was employed "as a sort of combination stage manager, light man and disembodied voice announcing the acts over an off-stage mike, . . ."27 That job lasted almost exactly seven years, and proved to be the longest term of sustained employment Bessie had ever had.

During that period, a number of articles bearing his byline appeared in various publications of varying political configurations, from Contact, a magazine published in Sausalito, California, to Pravda in the USSR, with themes on such diverse subjects as the Academy Awards to American Veterans in the U.S.S.R. One article, The non-Existent Man²⁸ would prove the genesis of Bessie's next book. It would turn out to be a non-fiction account of his experiences: in Hollywood as a contract and freelance screenwriter; in Washington, as a witness before the House Committee on Un-American Activities; and in Texarkana, Texas, as a prisoner in the Federal Correctional Institution. The book was published in 1965 and titled Inquisition in Eden. It had been the source of much of the material already used in the preparation of this study.

The book went on sale in March, 1965, but as early as January pre-reviews began to appear. A

mimeographed sheet known as the Virginia Kirkus Bulletin, dated January 1st, 1965, reports: "A sad tale. . . . Unfortunately, it is a tiresome and inconclusive one as well. . . . Something self-serving, something intellectually fraudulent is here. . . ."29

William Hogan, the book reviewer for the San Francisco Chronicle was more generous. In his column of March 5th, he writes: ". . . a vivid and revealing document on life in the motion picture industry . . . It is a tough and honest document and I recommend it."

The Florida Times-Union and the Jacksonville Journal editions of March 7th, carried a review signed Bob Pate. "This look at Movietown--and at the headline seeking political football which was the House Un-American Activities Committee of the late 1940's and early 1950's is almost compulsory reading for both students of political science and the Hollywood scene."

The March 8th edition of Newsweek gave the book almost two full columns. The unsigned review refers to Inquisition in Eden as "a peculiarly disappointing pastiche." The review then goes on to attack the book on four fronts:

As prison literature, "Inquisition in Eden" abounds in honest observation but ranks far below Cummings or Koestler. As a schema of Hollywood's chronic, craven lunacy, it is no match for the artistry of "The Day of the Locust" or the pungency of "What Makes Sammy Run?" As political reporting it is incomplete. . . .

On March 10th, both Variety and Daily Variety printed a review by Thomas M. Pryor. It is especially interesting as a kind of review that would have been hardly possible by one of the Industry "trade papers" during the "fear-climate" of the late '40's or early '50's.

In broad strokes Bessie paints the terrible picture of darkness that descended upon Hollywood. Because of the fear of intimidation as it can affect a medium so vast as the motion picture is so much bigger than any individual (with all due regard for personal anguish that has been, and continues to be, suffered), "Inquisition in Eden" is one of the most important books that has been written about modern Hollywood. It is unfortunate that the book does not offer a more thorough study of Hollywood's shame so that it can't happen here again.

If Variety tended to reflect a more liberal atmosphere in Hollywood and the Film Industry, the publication Films in Review seemed to echo a rhetoric of the earlier time. Reviewer Warren Locke in the May number of that magazine wrote:

The means by which Mr. Bessie and nine other film writers and directors defended their beliefs in '47 did their cause, and themselves harm. Indeed, the ends the "Hollywood Ten" sought to serve almost 20 years ago seem evanescent now, . . .

In the fifteen years since he served a year in the Federal prison in Texarkana, Mr. Bessie has learned nothing and forgotten nothing, and his book has an old fashioned, even an obsolete air. One cringes at what he does with the truth, and at the brazen cunning with which he pays off old scores. It is painful to see him, in this book, still toady (sic) to John Howard Lawson; hypocritically ridicule Earl Browder; be slyly malevolent toward some of those who helped him. And his ignorance of economics! (He calls a minor corporation like

Warner Brothers a "financial octopus.") . . .

One wonders about Mr. Bessie's title: Inquisition in Eden. Is United States the Eden? Or Hollywood? Or the three or four years Mr. Bessie had in Hollywood earning from \$300 to \$600 a week writing screenplays in which he did not believe.

If Variety welcomed Inquisition in Eden with warmth and Films in Review had damned it on sight, then The Journal, the publication of the Screen Producers Guild chose to regard it with what might be considered a sigh of regret at Bessie's bad grace at setting down his remembrances of sins past. (As detailed in an earlier chapter, it was the Association of Motion Picture Producers who formulated the "Waldorf Declaration," the instrument that instituted the blacklist measure against "The Ten.")

Lou Greenspan produced this review for the June issue of the Producers Journal:

Bessie chose to stand up for what he believed in and take the consequences. His crying "shame" on others who did not choose this same course merely discloses his stature and the fact that he couldn't take it. . . .

What he has to say in this book is not new. . . . The disturbed period about which he writes was an unfortunate one, both for himself and others like him, and the picture business as well. No one liked what was happening, but neither could some of the actions and reactions have been avoided in the climate that prevailed then. . . .

No new light nor old heat will be shed as a result of this book. It will eventually come to rest on a musty library shelf and will be forgotten. . . .

Robert R. Kirsch, the book editor for the Los Angeles Times, not only reviewed the book in his April 2nd column, but took on the author himself.

As a work of autobiography it leaves much to be desired; as part of the record of some critical years in this country's history it has relevance. . . .

The curious thing which emerges from this chronicle . . . is that Bessie, whatever his politics . . . was a creature of Hollywood.

Like many another Hollywood writer, he is bitter and cynical about the "real tinsel" of the place, but there is plenty of internal evidence to suggest that his own principles were elastic when it came to remaining at work here. . . .

The book itself disappoints in other ways. Bessie does not seem to have grown either as a writer or a thinker. There is a quality of arrested development contradicting the popular notion that ordeal necessarily promotes maturation.

The tone is snide and sarcastic, overwhelmed by a bitterness which may be understandable in some ways but is unpleasant and whining in effect. . . .

The June issue of Playboy, containing an unsigned review, was even more open in its attack:

It is an irksome book. The "good guys" read the New Masses, join the Lincoln Brigade (as Bessie did) and cheer Russia. The "bad guys" are just as conveniently stereotyped. . . . That is the median level of Bessie's critical thinking, and of his prose. . . . Bessie was a political prisoner, . . . His ordeal has earned him a better biographer than himself.

The prestigious New York Times in its Book Review section of June 20th, printed this comment by novelist and TV writer David Karp:

He [Bessie] considers himself a victim of an "inquisition" in "Eden." . . . Mr. Bessie's treatment in an American "Eden" sharply contrasts with the treatment similar recalcitrance would have netted him in a Soviet "Eden." To ignore the difference as he does is to invite a charge of intellectual dishonesty, at worst, or shocking political ingenuousness at best.

On July 4th, the New York Times ran a five-column interview with Bessie, bylined Joanne Stang. The interview made no comment on Inquisition in Eden, nor offered any opinion of its author. Bessie spoke for himself. Regarding his being a "victim" of an "inquisition," he made this point:

I can get upset about [the blacklist] once in a while when I think of the kind of people who spawned the House Un-American Activities Committee, and how the 1947 hearings accomplished exactly what the Committee intended. . . . to intimidate and control the motion picture industry which was beginning to say things--right after the war--that it had never attempted to say before. . . .

Sometimes I am able to personalize the episode enough to think of it as a waste of 20 years of my life. But mostly I think of ideologies which support the Nazis and the Klan, and all the witch-hunting committees, and I am fearful for everyone.

If any evaluation may be deduced from the above-quoted reviews, perhaps it is that by the time Inquisition in Eden appeared, the atmosphere of hostility and fear that had predominated during the era of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the "reign" of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, had abated. An attitude of "it was all a tragic mistake. Now let's forget it," seemed to alternate with "It was all their own fault. If they stood up and said what they were, and what they believed in, they wouldn't have gotten in trouble. Now let's forget it."

While some critics were glowing in their praise of the book and the author, others did call for blood and

made direct attacks on the author's personality and politics. It is interesting, if not relevant, that unlike the reviews of Bessie's earlier work, The un-Americans, the critiques on Inquisition in Eden did not fall exclusively into the two predicted openly partisan camps. As shown, a number of favorable, and some merely tolerant reviews came from conservative sources who had originally condemned "The Ten" and their actions, while some of the leftist press was openly critical of Bessie's work. By the end of the summer of 1965, the majority of reviews had been written and published. The book's sales (either because of, or in spite of, the mixed reviews) were disappointingly limited, and the book did not go into any further American editions.

5

The Symbol

(The Novel)

Note: This story is a fiction. Neither its characters nor the situations in which they are involved are intended to represent any persons now living or dead (or both), although the milieu in which they exist has produced many like them. . . . 30

Neither the critics nor the readers believed that legal disclaimer in the front of Alvah Bessie's The Symbol. What they did believe, and what appeared in almost every review of the book was that the leading character of The Symbol was nothing else than a thinly disguised

portrait of the late screen star, Marilyn Monroe.

The story concerns the life and death of Wanda Oliver, a motion picture super-star. It traces her life from her unhappy childhood, living in foster homes, through her pathetic early first marriage, divorce, career as a model and motion picture bit-part player, to her stardom in films, and finally her tragic death. The novel details her two subsequent marriages, to a famous football star, and then to a "social protest" painter, and her various relationships with the people who controlled and manipulated her and her career. The book is larded with sexual encounters and "blow by blow" descriptions, but it possesses a deeper level: exploitation of human beings by each other for profit. Apparently most of the critics did not bother to read that deeply.

The Symbol was published on January 19, 1967. A pre-publication review in the December 30, 1966, edition of The Hollywood Reporter gave the book a review that would not be typical. Reviewer James Powers told his readers: "Bessie . . . has written a moving, penetrating novel about a young woman who was one of the most perplexing public figures of her time. . . . The Symbol is a good book, a true book, and may be the final word on the creation and destruction of that fragile, glittering essence called Movie Star."

On January 15, 1967,³¹ the St. Louis Post-Dispatch printed a review by the author, Martha Gellhorn. It is one of the very few that neither indicates the similarity of the leading character to Marilyn Monroe nor criticizes Bessie for exploiting that similarity. Miss Gellhorn writes:

This novel will surely be a best seller for clear and erroneous reasons. People will say: "I had no idea . . . so that's how it was,"
The Symbol is remarkable because it was written by a man and is the story of an entirely believable woman. . . .
 . . . We see her steadily and whole, from her ugly childhood to her early, sad, muddled end. . . .
 There is not a cardboard figure or a canned voice in the novel.³²

Nationally syndicated columnist Jimmy Cannon in his column of January 23rd gave both novel and author short-shrift: "The Symbol by Alvah Bessie [is] a garbage pail of a Hollywood novel."

Critic Wirt Williams writing in the New York Times Book Review Section comments on Bessie's Hollywood novel:

To this list of valuable books [about Hollywood] now comes Alvah Bessie's The Symbol. It seeks to find and to reconstruct the psychological--even the physiological--substance upon which one of the largest goddess myths was founded. In this, I think, it succeeds admirably. . . .
 . . . and Mr. Bessie's deep knowledge of the *métier* is everywhere in evidence. We have an exciting addition to the small number of those good books about our mythic creatures.

In the same section, a full page paid advertisement for The Symbol appears.

In Phoenix, Arizona, the February 9th issue of

The Gazette levelled this blast: "There ought to be a law against such bad taste. . . . Shame on everyone who had anything to do with this book."

Jack O'Brian's review in the February 12th edition of the World Journal Tribune teetered on the hysterical:

The Symbol by Alvah Bessie is the junkiest literary insult of all seasons, a triumph of leering greed over taste, the dirtiest, trashiest posthumous performing pornography with two of the tallest examples of unadulterated chutzpah at the very front of the book: this blatant vulgar pastiche of a Marilyn Monroe memory (why won't these performing parasites let the poor girl remain dead?) proclaims that this-story-is-a fiction, etc.; and on the other page comes a quotation from the Bible;
 33

On May 18th, 1967, The Symbol was released in Great Britain under the imprint of The Bodley Head publishers. The Sunday Times of May 21st published a review by Montague Haltrecht:

The Symbol is a book about Hollywood which deplores its values without itself being tainted by them, and for this alone it is notable
 . . . the reader is enveloped in its atmosphere of pitiable desolation.

Donald Skiller, professor in charge of the Cinema Program at State University College, Oneonta, New York, reviewed The Symbol for the Fall/Winter edition of Film Comment, in terms of film construction.

Reading The Symbol . . . is like seeing one of those movies that Manny Farber called underground in an essay for Commentary in 1957. To Farber, at that time, underground meant " . . . speed, inner life and view with the least amount of flat foot." Much of what Farber said about these films parallels the unpretentious passion behind Bessie's novel.

A completely gratuitous criticism of The Symbol appeared in 1968, when Walter Goodman in his book The Committee wrote:

In 1966, Bessie contributed to the world of letters a novel entitled The Symbol, based on the life of the late Marilyn Monroe. If there was anything to be said for a blacklist, Bessie's work would say it.³⁴

And of Bessie himself? It is a popular view among many critics and academics that the last person to turn to for a definition of his work is the artist who created it. On February 14th, 1965, in an interview with Paine Knickerbocker, film critic for the San Francisco Chronicle, Bessie provides both critics and scholars with some insights into himself and his work which I believe are worth repeating here:

The novel incorporates how I grew to feel about the motion picture industry. . . . It is not a polemic. I've told the story in terms of human character. I've always been fascinated by the industry. It's a great art medium. . . .

. . . But I'm convinced those who ran the industry couldn't care less about the personal problems of the creative people. Their great concern was to make money.

The result . . . was the destruction of human personality. That's what interested me in writing this novel.

I've taken a girl--give her whatever name you wish--who resembled many I have known. Very few made it to stardom. But most of them were destroyed. I am outraged by this, by the exploitation of any human being. . . .

The point of my book is to convey what happens to human beings in this particular set-up. Anyone who wishes to find parallels in The Symbol can do so, but mine is complete fiction. I've attempted a serious compassionate book in which I've poured more emotion than any other I've ever written.

The book, regardless of the reasons which caused it to sell, achieved "best seller" status in its paperback edition. It became the most popular and financially successful of any of Bessie's works. It was a success, however, that of this date he has yet to repeat.

6

The Sex Symbol
(The Teleplay)

In a review of The Symbol, one critic wrote, "Bessie could have included 'Sex' between 'The' and 'Symbol' in his title and probably attracted some more sales."³⁵

Early in 1973, an agreement was finalized between Bessie's agent and Screen Gems, Inc. to produce a 90 minute television Movie of the Week version of The Symbol. It was to be called The Sex Symbol. It would capture high ratings, but its other results were far from what anyone had expected, let alone, hoped.

The stormy conflict between Bessie and the film's producer is a story that offers a view into one area of motion picture making that most viewers know nothing about, nor care, really. But it is a story that corroborates Bessie's theme of exploitation as put forth in his novel, The Symbol, except in this case, ironically, it is Bessie himself who is the victim.

The attempt to deprive him of his "solo" screen credit, as well as what was done to his original screenplay, does not fall within the parameters of this study, except, perhaps to comment that the final assembled teleplay came closer to representing the life and death of Marilyn Monroe than Bessie's novel had ever done. Bessie has gone on record as stating that these were not his original creations.

Whatever social comment the two drafts of Bessie's original teleplay may have retained, was entirely absent by the time the drastically re-edited final product appeared.³⁶ Not only had the social criticism vanished but so had many vital elements of the story line itself.

Bessie was forced to bring his case to the Writers' Guild for arbitration in order to secure his single credit. (It was the first credit he had received on a Hollywood film product since 1947.) Although it was hard won, it was a credit he was to disown, as well as an experience he determined he would never repeat.

In reply to the San Francisco Chronicle television critic's statement:

It is difficult to believe that Alvah Bessie could write a screenplay that was as tacky as his novel The Symbol--but . . . "The Sex Symbol" . . . was every bit as ordinary as the book and more so.³⁷

Bessie wrote:

Whatever you may have thought of my 1967 novel,

The Symbol. . . . It was an attempt to demonstrate what has happened to too many young women like my protagonist

I have learned a bitter lesson from this experience. I will never again sell anything I have written or may write in the future, to commercial television which we have all recognized for far too long exists for the sole purpose of selling people things they do not need and could be better off without. Including the "entertainment" that coats the pill of profit.³⁸

7

España Otra Vez (Spain Again)

(The Film)

Late in September, 1967, Bessie was still enjoying the success of The Symbol when he unexpectedly received a letter from Spain from one Jaime Camino, a Spanish film director whom he had met several years before, while acting as public relations man for the San Francisco International Film Festival. The letter, "calmly set forth a proposition that simply could not be made. A Spanish film company, on his insistence, wished me to come to Barcelona 'immediately,' all expenses paid."³⁹

Camino briefly outlined the screenplay he was currently writing:

. . . which concerns a person, a former fighter in the Spanish Civil War who served on the Republican side as a doctor. This person is an American and he returns to Spain to attend a medical congress. . . . This is an extremely moving experience to him to find himself once more in Barcelona after 30 years of absence. When the congress is over, he returns to the United States. . . .

I believe this is a moving theme that will surely

interest you. Therefore, I raise the question of your collaboration with me.⁴⁰

The question of collaboration raised mixed feelings in Bessie:

He had raised the ghost of the fact that I had been blacklisted in the motion picture industry in my own country for 20 solid years--and here I was being offered an opportunity to work once more at a craft I thoroughly enjoyed.

He was naively(?) summoning to Spain a man who had been the enemy of its regime for more than 30 years; who had written and spoken against it indefatigably; . . .⁴¹

He resolved his mixed feelings, and he and his wife, Sylviane, flew to Barcelona to begin work on a motion picture to be titled España Otra Vez or Spain Again. Bessie would not only collaborate on the screenplay with director Camino and writer Román Gubern but appear as a performer as well.⁴² His experiences in Spain, and his reaction to and criticism of the fascist Franco regime are discussed in the following section.

The film starred the American actor Mark Stevens, who had been introduced into pictures in the film Objective Burma, for which Bessie had written the original story. He was now making his home in Mallorca. In addition, it would be the first time in more than 20 years that Bessie would see his name on a motion picture screen. For him, the blacklist was finally over.

But what of the content of the film? The producer, who, Bessie was to learn, had not only fought on the side

of Franco and his Falangist forces but in the same battles in which he had fought as a member of the opposing International Brigade, "was trying to excise everything I had contributed to the film. He succeeded in part."

In his book, Spain Again, Bessie cites a passage regarding the enormous tourist trade in Spain, and its importance to the Spanish economy:

Dr. Thomas: . . . If the tourist trade fell off, everything would come to a head. . . . To begin with, they would close certain hotels and, naturally, they would build fewer apartment houses. What would this mean? It would mean unemployment for cooks, waiters, building workers, and all those people who, in one way or another, live on the tourist trade. . . . This means that these people, without work, would buy less clothing, foot wear, fewer television sets, less wine. . . . In a word, their level of consumption would fall. With this--and here comes the chain reaction--there would be a crisis in the shoe industry, the clothing industry, the manufacture of wine and all the rest. And if the tourist industry falls off, we are - - -.43

In a footnote, Bessie adds, "the speech, of course, was deleted by the censor. . . ."44

In the book, Spain Again, Bessie relates that he saw a list of objections that the Censura (censor) had sent to Camino regarding the original screenplay. They were listed as "suggestions," but as Camino had explained to Bessie, "all Spanish films were subsidized up to 60 percent of the cost of production--if they were approved--

the operation of the carrot and the club was beautifully exemplified."⁴⁵

Some of the suggestions Bessie quotes deal with references to the Civil War and the havoc it wreaked upon the people; a visual and verbal reference to Franco's "Obelisk of Victory;" a priest's remarks about "rich alumni;" and a man who wanted to study to be an engineer, but was driving a taxi in the city; a specific line, "Yes, she had a hard time after the war. The truth is we all had a hard time after the war. . . ."⁴⁶

In addition to the scene with the priest, Bessie had also written some additional dialogue about the War, and a scene in a mental institution in which an obviously highly disturbed patient confides to the visiting American doctor that he is "hiding" in the institution; that "the Reds are hiding everywhere" and want to kill him. He warns the resident Spanish doctor, "They're coming to get me. They'll get you, too." The sequence ends with the Spanish psychiatrist telling the American neurosurgeon, "We've tried everything. . . . Nothing helps. It's an obsession. . . ."⁴⁷

When, in a story conference, the director told him it was impossible to shoot the sequence, Bessie asked, "Why not?" Camino replied, "You know the answer, . . . it would not be accepted."⁴⁸

During what would prove to be their last story conference, they discussed the cutting of some of the material Bessie had written, and he recalled:

The testimony of the "friendly" witnesses in 1947, who had accused us (but seduously avoided citing chapter and verse) of "slipping Communist propaganda" into Hollywood films. I wondered if that's what I had tried to do. What I had not done had resulted in my expulsion from the Industry--for over 20 years!

. . . Was it Communist propaganda to show the truth? Was I attempting to slant a film . . . ?

Was the truth being distorted and "used" for a purpose? . . . What was the difference between truth and propaganda--if there was any? How is reality reflected in a motion picture script?⁴⁹

Unfortunately, Bessie offers no answers to those weighty and very meaningful questions. Perhaps there are no meaningful answers.

In 1968, España Otra Vez (Spain Again) was completed and released, complete with Bessie's screen credit. It was awarded a prize of 1 million pesetas from the government controlled National Syndicate of Entertainment. Away from Spain, it proved to be something less of a success. It was entered as Spain's official entry in the Academy Award race. It did not win; neither was it picked up for distribution in this country.

I had the privilege of seeing España Otra Vez (Spain Again) at a special showing in a theatre in San Francisco in 1968. As I recall, the story line, as Bessie described it in his book, Spain Again, was left intact. In the version I saw (which I

assume was the final cut) I recall, very little, if any, overt social or political comment. But that was a long time ago.

Not having seen the film in almost 10 years and never having read the original screenplay, and having only read the cut portions which Bessie cites in Spain Again, I can only offer this admittedly gratuitous comment: conceding that Bessie's material was offensive to, or even considered inflammatory by, the ruling Fascist regime, I cannot help but wonder whether the Spanish theatre-going audiences wish to be educated as to economics and politics any more than do their American counterparts. However, that is no reason for censoring their discussion. A ruling government makes its own reasons, however.

·8

Spain Again

(The Book)

In 1975, Spain Again was published along with a new edition of Bessie's earlier work Men in Battle. The book tells of his 1967 experience, the filming of the screenplay on which he worked, and his own deep emotions at revisiting the country whose Republican form of government he, and his companions of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion, had fought so courageously to maintain.

Spain Again is more than a nostalgic look at the

past, and a mournful one at the present. The book functions on several levels. First, the story of Bessie's "sentimental journey;" the return to areas where he had seen and made war; the unsuccessful search for his friend's gravesite and his encounters with the Spanish people whom he had helped try to save from Fascism.

Second: the story of the making of a film in a foreign country, with all its attendant problems; a leading lady who couldn't act, a leading man who apparently felt disinclined to act, and a collaborating writer whose most meaningful material was cut, or never filmed, because of the director's fears that it would not be "accepted."

Interesting as they are, I find them to be subordinate to more relevant statements of Spain Again, including a running comparison of the German and Italian intervention in Spain during the Civil War of 1936-1939 with the intervention of the United States in Viet Nam in the 1960's and '70's, which he supports with a number of unyielding facts and frightening parallels.

The book's final chapter contains a well-documented history of Spain since the end of the Civil War, thirty-three pages of text filled with examples illustrating, point by point, the oppressive nature and bankrupt philosophy of the Franco regime, and its successor. While they are not germane to the purpose of this study, they are recommended to anyone seeking a concise socio-political

overview of Spain for the last forty years.

In his column, Perspectives in the Rolling Stone magazine of May 8th, 1975, the late Ralph J. Gleason offered this brief view of both Bessie and the book he produced:

Those who scorned this book are wrong. It will last Bessie tells us what he saw and what it was like, and because he understands why it was like that and what was going on . . . his work teaches as it grips you.

Lottie Gordon, writing in the August 1, 1975 edition of the Daily World, sees Spain Again as:

. . . both history and . . . a bit of the future-- . . . Especially helpful to young people who want to know about the Americans who went to fight Fascism in Spain and yet are caught up in the anti-Soviet slanders so prevalent in our country. . . .

Reviewer Sean Griffin reviewing Spain Again in the May 21, 1976 copy of the Vancouver, B.C. Pacific Tribune, saw two Alvah Bessies:

Besides Bessie the writer there is Bessie the internationalist reminding his readers of the reasons for Franco's victory . . . and reminding us again that it is unholy dollars from successive U.S. governments that have kept the Caudillo and his successor afloat. Above all, there is Bessie's optimism for the final victory of the Spanish people and his affirmation of solidarity, which, after all brought him to Spain 30 years before.

Unfortunately for the sake of the book (certainly not that of the reader) Spain Again was not reviewed as widely as its companion seller, Men in Battle. According to Bessie, it has sold less than four thousand copies.

I think it deserves better, and I believe that time will treat it kindly.

Since the publication of Spain Again in 1975, no new books have appeared by Alvah Bessie. Two unsold novels, One for my Baby, based, in part, on his experiences working in a San Francisco night club, and The Serpent Was More Subtil, structured around a young man's efforts to become a herpetologist, have been produced. A number of book reviews by him, as well as interviews with him, have appeared in newspapers, magazines, on radio and television. He has been a guest lecturer at various universities, speaking on the subjects closest to him: Spain, and his position before the "House Committee" and the thirty years of consequences which that action produced.

In addition, there is a regular column titled Considered Opinion in which Bessie offers just that, and on any subject which may catch his fancy--or his fury. The column currently appears in the national magazine, In These Times.

I have chosen a few brief excerpts from several of those columns to illustrate the diversity of subjects, the direct thrust of his attacks, and his ever-present and unyielding commitment to the public good, as he envisions it to be:

On the Neutron Bomb:

We have perfected a bomb, that will kill people and not damage property, . . .

. . . there is nothing particularly new about any capitalist nation's tender concern for the choicer pieces of the enemy's real-estate.

How could it be otherwise? The people who order the buttons pushed are the same people who own the real estate, and they're not crazy, are they?⁵⁰

On television violence, and the state of the medium:

Sooner or later it had to happen; a teen-ager in Florida who was an "ardent" television fan broke into the home of a woman neighbor, robbed her and shot her dead.

His lawyer pled him not guilty by reason of insanity. He said the violence the boy had witnessed in the programs he watched obsessively day and night in defiance of parental authority had driven him mad.

. . . What can we do about it? What should we do about it? Can we hold still for governmental, state, local or vigilante censorship of the medium if it will not police itself and cannot develop any taste at all?

They tell us, "If you don't like it, don't look at it." They're absolutely right. That's precisely what we should do--turn it off. But we should also stock a supply of postcards on which we write: "Because of your disgusting program called (insert title) I will never again buy (insert product)."⁵¹

On Anita Bryant's anti "gay" crusade:

It is difficult to decide which of the two loud antagonistic groups is the more obnoxious these days: the sad people clamoring for "gay" liberation or the red-neck followers of a Florida orange juice huckster named Anita Bryant, who also sings. . . .

There is a great deal of blatant nonsense surrounding these two great campaigns; the red-necks attempt to deny homosexuals to live where they please and work at any job they are capable to handle and enjoy public accommodation open to the population and the sads' now militant campaign to get their peculiar bent legitimized and accepted as just another "normal" form of interpersonal relationship and sexual activity. . . .

But it is also a fact that every society that has been in a state of disintegration and decay has also witnessed an increase, not only in homosexuality but also alcoholism, pornography, drug addiction, public and private debauchery, divorce, national and international violence, insanity, suicide and murder.

Ours is no different than our predecessors' from the days of the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. It may well turn out to be the glittering horror of them all.⁵³

NOTES

- ¹Alvah Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, p. 16.
- ²Actually ten months. Two months were deducted for "good behavior."
- ³Alvah Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, p. 51.
- ⁴Ibid., pp. 53-54.
- ⁵Ibid., p. 58.
- ⁶Ibid., p. 71.
- ⁷Ibid., p. 73.
- ⁸Ibid., pp. 105-106.
- ⁹Ibid., pp. 106-107. (Not only did Edward Dmytryk "go over," in doing so he furnished the Committee with twenty-six names, including Bessie and Biberman--in alphabetical order.)
- ¹⁰Ibid., p. 129.
- ¹¹Ibid., p. 140.
- ¹²Ibid., pp. 140-141.
- ¹³Blau v. United States, 1950. Cited by Alvah Bessie, Inquisition in Eden (New York: Macmillan Company, 1965; reprint ed. E. Berlin: 7 Seas Books, 1967), pp. 132-133.
- ¹⁴Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, p. 133.
- ¹⁵Ibid., p. 173. The last line of an untitled sonnet.
- ¹⁶The list was topped by screenwriter Martin Berkeley who provided the Committee with 150 names. His list along with those of many others appears in Robert Vaughn, Only Victims (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1972), pp. 275-292.
- ¹⁷Alvah Bessie, tape recorded interview, 7 March 1977.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid., regarding Watson's own experience with the U.S. Supreme Court, see Edwin Emery, The Press in America, 3d ed. (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 1972), pp. 683-684.

²¹Statement before 6th District Court, Washington, D.C., 29 June 1950.

²²Alvah Bessie, The un-Americans (New York: Cameron & Associates, 1957), p. 357.

²³Ibid., p. 383.

²⁴George Hitchcock, Review of The un-Americans by Alvah Bessie, in American Socialist, June 1957, p. 22.

²⁵Gold even found Bessie's use of "four-letter words" acceptable, a feature "which left-wing editors have never permitted."

²⁶Unsigned review of The un-Americans by Alvah Bessie, in the Queen, December 24, 1957.

²⁷Bessie, Inquisition in Eden, p. 296.

²⁸Contact #6, Sausalito, California, 1960.

²⁹All subsequent reviews cited are dated 1965, unless specifically cited otherwise.

³⁰Alvah Bessie, The Symbol (New York: Random House, 1966), note on flyleaf of book.

³¹All subsequent reviews cited are dated 1967, unless specifically cited otherwise.

³²This author has discovered at least one minor character which was outrageously overdrawn!

³³Psalm 139.

³⁴Walter Goodman, The Committee, p. 215 (fn).

³⁵Thatcher Walt, Florida Times Union, 13 February 1967.

³⁶Drafts of the original teleplay may be found in the Alvah Bessie Collection at the University of Wisconsin Center for Theatre Research, Madison, Wisconsin.

³⁷Terrence O'Flaherty, San Francisco Chronicle, 18 September 1974.

³⁸Letter from Alvah Bessie to Terrence O'Flaherty, 18 September 1974.

³⁹Alvah Bessie, Spain Again (San Francisco: Chandler & Sharp Publishers, Inc., 1975), p. 20.

⁴⁰Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁴¹Ibid., p. 21.

⁴²His body appears, that is; he was unable to stay in Spain long enough to dub his own voice. A British voice was used in the mouth of a surgeon from Texas. Bessie maintains he is as good an actor as the author. Possibly.

⁴³Bessie, Spain Again, p. 87.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 112.

⁴⁶Ibid., pp. 111-112.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 115.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 116.

⁴⁹Ibid., pp. 113-114.

⁵⁰In These Times and Marin Life, August, 1977.

⁵¹In These Times and Marin Life, November, 1977.

⁵²Marin Life, July, 1977.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

I have examined the life and work of Alvah Bessie, and the influences his Marxist philosophy and Communist involvement have brought to bear upon that work in various areas of mass media in which he has employed his talents. I have arrived at a number of conclusions, many of them self-evident. To summarize:

1. The three novels published during his affiliation with, and after his departure from the Communist Party are open political and social statements, and were written as such.

a. Bread and a Stone: a direct attack on the social system which forces a man to commit murder, albeit not premeditated, and the inequities of the justice system which sentenced that man to execution.

b. The un-Americans: a direct broadside against what Bessie has referred to elsewhere as a "peculiarly American form of Fascism." He attacks the system which causes a man to compromise his principles to maintain his position as well as his possessions.

In his statement before the 6th District Court in Washington, D.C. at the time of his trial and conviction

for contempt of Congress, Bessie told the court that his fight against the forces of General Franco, as a member of the International Brigade, and his position against the House Un-American Activities Committee as a member of "The Hollywood Ten," were, in his opinion, "two engagements in the same struggle."

In The un-Americans, Bessie illustrates that linkage. He shows how those men who fought to save Spain from Fascism are the first ones condemned by the people and committees attempting to prepare the United States for it; he illustrates in fictional terms how the Army of the United States, in reality, considered those Veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade who enlisted during World War II as suspect because of their "premature anti-fascist" activity.

c. The Symbol: the unmistakable resemblance to the tortured life and tragic death of a famous motion picture "superstar," as well as the vivid descriptions of numerous sexual encounters, were undoubtedly largely responsible for the wide success of Bessie's novel. As in his earlier works, Bread and a Stone and The un-Americans, The Symbol has a strong social theme: exploitation of human beings by their fellows for profit. He has set his novel in the motion picture industry, where much emphasis is placed on the young and the beautiful people, and where

those qualities are highly marketable. Bessie's rage at the situation is indicated, not by what he has to say about it, but by showing us how his characters are controlled, and in the case of his protagonist, doomed by it. Bessie states a real problem that is indigenous to the society in which it festers. The fact that he offers his readers no palpable solutions, political or otherwise, in no way lessens the value of the novel.

The three autobiographical non-fiction works published roughly during the same period as the above-discussed novels are also strong and intentional social and political commentary.

a. Men in Battle: Bessie's personal account of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion's participation in the Spanish Civil War, is not only a recounting of the battle action of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion and the XVth International Brigade to which it was attached, but a condemnation of the German and Italian governments that openly supported Franco's fascist forces with men, munitions and money.

In the almost forty years since its original publication, Men in Battle has become recognized as one of the definitive books on the participation of the Abraham Lincoln Battalion in the Spanish Civil War.

b. Inquisition in Eden: is more than a history relating Bessie's experiences in Hollywood as a contract and free-lance screenwriter; the appearance of the

"Hollywood Ten" before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, and his personal ordeal in a Federal Penitentiary in Texas. The book is an open indictment of the Congressional Committee that conducted the hearing; the producers who vowed support, and then created and propagated the blacklist; the film makers who endorsed the blacklist, but were willing to hire the blacklisted on the black-market, on sub-rosa, sub-standard salaries; and the ineffectual, and, for the most part, unconcerned penal system in the United States, whose efforts at rehabilitation and treatment of prisoners, Bessie learned, were virtually non-existent.

c. Spain Again: as in all his other works, Bessie is forthright in declaring himself an open, avowed--and informed--enemy of the Franco regime. He provides page after page of documentation. He attacks motion picture censorship in Spain, and parallels the United States' intervention and participation in the Viet Nam civil war with the similar action of Germany and Italy during the Civil War in Spain.

3. The articles I have examined and presented in earlier chapters contain frequent criticisms of the inequities Bessie has found existing in the Capitalist society. In the reviews and feature articles written while he was a member of the staff of the New Masses,

I have pointed out specific instances where I believed him to be adhering to the Communist Party "line" of the period.

4. Regarding the original screenplays and stories for screen adaptation which Bessie wrote, I found, as did Dorothy B. Jones in her comprehensive study, Communism in the Movies, no echoing of Communist party "line," nor any statement of Marxist philosophy. Neither did I find any of those aspects present (nor, indeed, much of anything at all) in his produced teleplay, The Sex Symbol.

On the basis of the material I have studied, I have come to this conclusion: in those books (fiction and non-fiction) and those articles where Bessie had control over what he wrote and what was finally published, the great bulk of his material is open commentary on, and even condemnation of, a profit-making oriented--and obsessed--society which Bessie believes to be in great part not only highly exploitive but increasingly oppressive, not just to the artist, but to all types of labor, whatever its manifestation. Another theme running throughout Bessie's work is his condemnation of Fascism, as he openly found it in Spain, and declared he has found it in Washington and in Hollywood.

In the material which Bessie wrote, over which he did not have final control (namely his screenplays in both Hollywood and Spain, and the ^{American} one teleplay he wrote),

I find that his Hollywood products contain social comment that reflects the popular political and social viewpoint of the nation during, and immediately following World War II (1943-1946). Not having had the opportunity to read the original drafts of the screenplays, it is not possible to determine whether or not there was material written which was excised because it was considered too controversial or "harmful" to the American public by producers or directors who made the ultimate decision regarding what would and would not appear in the "final cut."

I conclude that Bessie's work reflects what he calls a "Marxist-Leninist interpretation of history," but not a consistent reflection of the constantly changing Communist Party "line."

In April, 1977, the U.S. Supreme Court, which declined to review the case of the "Hollywood Ten" in 1950, did review a similar case regarding two members of the Jehovah's Witnesses sect in New Hampshire. Considering the State's motto, "Live Free or Die," which was embossed on their automobile license plate repugnant to their beliefs, they covered it. For that offense, the car owner served two jail sentences; when faced with a third, he brought suit in a federal district court.

Presenting the Supreme Court's majority opinion, Chief Justice Warren Burger said:

A system which secures the right to proselytize religious, political and ideological causes must also guarantee the concomitant rights to decline to foster such concepts. The right to speak and the right to refrain from speaking are complimentary components of the broader concept of individual freedom of mind.¹

Commenting on Chief Justice Burger's opinion, Bessie wrote in a letter to the San Francisco Chronicle: "Cold comfort after all of 30 years, but some vindication, no doubt."²

Perhaps time has dulled the savor of satisfaction, or, perhaps, time--along with the events which have marked it--has eroded that victory, such as it may have been, into meaninglessness.

A nineteenth-century poet asked this about another battle of another time:

"But what good came of it, at last?"
 Quoth little Peterkin.
 "Why that I cannot tell," said he;
 "But 'twas a famous victory."³

The question is still valid.

Perhaps a tiny segment of the answer came early in 1978. In one of those ironies which seem to punctuate Bessie's life, he was awarded a \$7,500 grant by the National Endowment for the Arts for his lifetime of work--by the same government which 30 years before had imprisoned him and been instrumental in causing him to become unemployable in his chosen profession. The grant was made without his ever having recanted that position he took

before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, or ever having compromised his own social philosophy and political principles.

Is it possible that those who know better, but once did worse, were at long last ready to forgive? Or more appropriately, seeking forgiveness? Those questions are valid, too.

And of that lifetime of work? In Spain Again, Bessie addressed himself to one segment of it--screen-writing; specifically, the problems and the responsibilities the socially-aware writer brings to that particular craft. It is a highly suitable statement with which to conclude this study:

I remembered an ancient argument we used to have in Hollywood--an argument that was endemic to progressive writers there; whether writing for Hollywood was or was not a sell-out of the very ideas we professed to cherish.

That was an easy one to rationalize. We could always claim with some validity, that our employment at least prevented Hollywood from making as many of the vicious anti-human films it so frequently manufactured.

It was a holding action, we used to say, and I could recall several instances in which I had performed such a role on several scripts. How? By creating real people out of cardboard figures; by supplying genuine motivations for them instead of gimmicks; by attempting to deal with the way people actually live in the world, instead of creating dream situations.

What purpose had it served? Hollywood still continues to manufacture and spread abroad throughout the world its seductive images of sex and violence that are conditioning entire generations to acceptance of a society in which the exploitation of man by man, the murder of man by man becomes as natural as the sunrise.⁴

All I have read, studied, believe I understand and know that I know, not only of the writing, but of the very life of my subject--and my friend--Alvah Bessie, reinforces my belief that so long as he (and a few Gibraltars of integrity like him) can wield a pen, strike a typewriter key and ask an "impertinent" question--for just so long, we've got a fighting chance.

NOTES

¹Warren E. Burger, Chief Justice, U.S. Supreme Court, quoted by Carey Mc. Williams, The Nation, July 23, 1977.

²Alvah Bessie, letter to San Francisco Chronicle, April 24, 1978.

³Robert Southey, The Battle of Blenheim, 1798.

⁴Bessie, Spain Again, p. 171.

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APPENDIX A

MOTION TO QUASH THE INDICTMENTS
OF THE "UNFRIENDLY NINETEEN"

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MOTION TO QUASH THE INDICTMENTS OF THE "UNFRIENDLY NINETEEN"

1. The motion picture, as a medium of expression, is entitled to the full protection of the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States in the same way as newspapers and the radio.

2. The Thomas Committee is attempting to control the content of motion pictures in such a way as to extract national conformity to the views of the Committee.

3. Congress is without power to censure the thinking and the expression of the American people; and the Committee has attempted to exercise the power of censorship; it is, therefore, an entirely unconstitutional creation without power to compel anyone to appear and testify before it.

4. The resolution establishing the Committee is void because it authorized the investigation of "propaganda." It is a term which operates entirely within the realm of opinion, thought, speech and advocacy--the very thing which is protected by the First Amendment against any legislative restriction. The Committee's power of inquiry is limited by the power of Congress to legislate.

Any inquiry not related to a valid legislative purpose is unauthorized and void. Inasmuch as Congress cannot legislate with respect to propaganda, it cannot appoint a committee with the power to inquire into that field.

5. The very classification of speech into "good" and "bad" speech, into "American" and "Un-American" speech is itself an abridgment of speech. Speech, whether it is labelled "propaganda" or anything else, cannot be classified as "good" or "bad," "American" or "Un-American" so far as the First Amendment is concerned. It is only when the field of speech or propaganda is passed and the field of action is entered into that the First Amendment no longer stands as a guard against legislative action.

6. This Committee has characterized the most moderate ideas of social change as subversive and un-American propaganda. It has villified distinguished persons for daring to disagree with it. The Committee has brought to the American scene the notion of a police state, which is contrary to every basic concept of a democracy.

7. The resolution under which the Committee acts is so vague and indefinite as to make it impossible for any person to determine whether a question put to him by the Committee is pertinent to the inquiry. The terms "subversive" and "Un-American" have different meanings according to the point of view of the person using them.

A statute using terms so vague and indefinite cannot be the basis for a criminal prosecution.

8. The entire history of the House Committee on Un-American Activities establishes that it has a non-legislative purpose; that is, that its purpose has been not to obtain information for purpose of drafting and proposing legislation, but rather that it has been to do such things as interfere in elections, interfere in strikes, attempt directly to control radio, the screen and other media of expression.

APPENDIX B

COMPLETE STATEMENT OF ALVAH BESSIE

TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON

UN-AMERICAN ACTIVITIES

October 29, 1947

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It is my understanding of the First Amendment to our Constitution that it expressly forbids Congress to pass any law which shall abridge freedom of speech or of opinion. And it is my understanding of the function of Congressional Committees that they are set up by the Congress for the express purpose of inquiring into matters that may lead to the initiation of legislation in the Congress.

Now either the Constitution and its Bill of Rights mean what they say or they do not mean what they say. Either the First Amendment is binding upon Congress and all legislative bodies of our Government, or it means nothing at all. I cannot agree with this so-called Committee in its implied belief that the Bill of Rights means whatever this body chooses it to mean, or is applicable only to those with whom this Committee is in agreement.

I am not in agreement with the opinions, activities; or objectives of this Committee or any Committee

remotely resembling it. And since the only legislation this Committee could possibly initiate would automatically abridge freedom of speech and opinion, and would therefore be automatically unconstitutional, I have come to the conclusion, that will eventually be borne out by events, that this body is totally unconstitutional and without power to inquire into anything I think, believe, uphold, and cherish, or anything I have ever written or said, or any organization I have ever joined or failed to join.

As a one-time newspaperman I have been deeply interested in the mounting reaction of disapproval by the press of the nation of the activities of this Committee. When the conservative New York Herald Tribune can say " . . . the beliefs of men and women who write for the screen are, like the beliefs of ordinary men and women, ~~no~~^{no}body's business but their own, as the Bill of Rights mentions. Neither Mr. Thomas nor the Congress in which he sits is empowered to dictate what Americans shall think . . ." and when the Chicago Times can say, "Of course, the real object of Chairman Thomas and the reactionary Republican majority of the House Un-American Activities Committee is not primarily to uncover subversive influences in Hollywood. It is to smear New Dealers and whatever their progressive successors may be called . . ."--then it is not difficult to any intelligent person

to realize that if this investigation is permitted to achieve its immediate objective it will not hesitate to move on from the motion-picture industry it has emasculated, to the throttling of the press, the radio, the theatre, and the book publishers of America. We saw this pattern at work before, in Hitler's Germany, and we understand it thoroughly. The true purpose of this Committee on Un-American Activities is to provide the atmosphere and to act as the spearhead for the really un-American forces preparing a Fascist America.

In calling me from my home this body hopes also to rake over the smoldering embers of the war ^{in Spain} that was fought from 1936 to 1939. This body, in all its previous manifestations, is on record as believing that support of the Spanish Republic was and is subversive, un-American, and Communist inspired. That lie was originally spawned by Hitler and Franco, and the majority of the people of ~~America~~ ~~the world~~--in fact the majority of the people of the world--never believed it. And I want it on record at this point that I not only supported the Spanish Republic but that it was my high privilege and the greatest honor I have ever enjoyed to have been a volunteer in the ranks of its International Brigades throughout 1938. And I shall continue to support the Spanish Republic until the Spanish people in their majesty and power remove Francisco Franco and all his supporters and reestablish the legal

government Franco and his Nazi and Italian Fascist soldiers overthrew.

The understanding that led me to fight in Spain for that Republic, and my experience in that war, teach me that this Committee is engaged in precisely the identical activities engaged in by un-Spanish Committees, un-German Committees, and un-Italian Committees which preceded it in every country which eventually succumbed to fascism. I will never aid or abet such a Committee in its patent attempt to foster the sort of intimidation and terror that is the inevitable precursor of a Fascist regime. And I therefore restate my conviction that this body has no legal authority to pry into the mind or activities of any American who believes, as I do, in the Constitution, and who is willing at any time to fight to preserve it--as I fought to preserve it in Spain.

APPENDIX C

RELEVANT ISSUES WHICH THE COURTS
REFUSED TO HEAR IN THE CASE OF
"THE HOLLYWOOD TEN"

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1

Proofs of illegal or extra-legal procedures of
the House Committee on Un-American Activities:

1. That the question of political affiliation was an incriminating question that we could not be compelled to answer, since the Committee had made it plain that it considered the Communist Party an international conspiracy;
2. That the question concerning trade-union affiliation was a link in the chain of questions to establish Communist membership and activities believed by the Committee to be criminal;
3. That the purpose of the Committee hearings was to inflict penalties on those it believed to be Communists, including criminal sanctions, discharge from employment, and destruction of their careers;
4. That the hearings were specifically directed against each of the defendants;
5. That there was no waiver of the privilege against self-incrimination in any of the cases, whether

the defendant invoked the First or the Fifth Amendment;

6. That the Committee failed to conduct its interrogations in such a way as to establish a refusal to answer.

2

Constitutional issues in matters of fact and law that District, Appellate and Supreme Courts refused to hear.

1. That the Committee's utilization of Congressional power to compel disclosure of private political opinion and association is forbidden by the First, Fourth and Fifth Amendments, as well as by the Ninth and Tenth;

2. That this particular inquiry into the motion-picture industry lay outside the lawful bounds of the power of the House Committee, because it contained a censorship of the content of motion pictures (First Amendment);

3. That the Committee in its attempt to impose a blacklist had placed itself above the Constitution and had disregarded the elementary requirements of due process of law;

4. That the statute creating the Committee itself was on its face unconstitutional;

5. That the trial courts committed innumerable prejudicial errors and denied petitioners a fair trial.

Offers of proof which trial courts deemed irrelevant:

* An analysis of thirty-nine years of research into the content of American motion-pictures, by Richard Griffith, executive-director of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, Inc., to demonstrate that no American motion picture had ever contained "material which by any standard could be considered to be subversive to . . . our system of government . . ." and to demonstrate the impossibility of screenwriters subverting the motion-picture screen and establish that they therefore represent no potential or actual threat;

* Cross-examination of Chairman J. Parnell Thomas and other Committee members to demonstrate the actual purpose of the hearings: to inflict penalties on those believed to be Communists;

* Demonstration of the fact that the questions asked were not pertinent to the inquiry, were an illegal invasion of the defendants' rights of privacy and were not necessary to aid the Committee in any way in obtaining information for any lawful legislative purpose;

* Demonstration of the historic acceptance under American law of the privacy of union membership lists;

* Disclosure of the history of the Screen Writers' Guild and the early attempts to prevent its growth and development by many of the friendly witnesses before the

Committee . . . , who at the time, took the position of the motion-picture industry and supported its attempt to prevent the organization of screenwriters into an effective union.

APPENDIX D

STATEMENT OF ALVAH BESSIE BEFORE
THE SIXTH DISTRICT COURT
WASHINGTON, D.C.

June 29, 1950

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STATEMENT OF ALVAH BESSIE BEFORE
THE SIXTH DISTRICT COURT
WASHINGTON, D.C.

June 29, 1950

Your Honor:

Two years and eight months ago when this process was initiated by the House Committee on Un-American Activities, I became convinced that that Committee was breaking the law--as it is embodied in the Bill of Rights.

Since then, not a day has passed that has not confirmed an estimate I made at that time of the developing political situation in our country. For every week has brought new repressive legislation and further attacks--by other agencies of the government--upon popular organization, whether trade union, cultural, fraternal, social or intellectual. Every month has confirmed my conviction that our country is being moved step by step to a peculiarly native form of fascism.

Should such a thing come to pass--should the American people permit themselves to be so deceived and so misled and so defeated, then jails and concentration camps would be filled with Americans who would, in fact, be imprisoned because they felt that their government was

wrong and exercised their distinctly American right to express opposition to their government.

Perhaps few Americans today will agree with those views. But if the current political climate in our country develops at its present hysterical pace, most Americans will take an identical position. And I am sure, your Honor, that you will agree that it is much easier for us to grant that non-conformists of an earlier period were correct, than to concede the same presumption to our contemporaries.

Today, for example, we honor Henry David Thoreau, a great American writer, for refusing to pay his taxes as a protest against Negro slavery. For this act he was thrown into jail, and while the great majority of his contemporaries did not follow his example, they did fight a four-year civil war that abolished Negro slavery.

Today we honor Lincoln for opposing the war we fought with Mexico in 1848--but he stood practically alone on the floor of Congress in his opposition. Today we honor Jefferson for fighting the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, but at the time he was widely denounced as a traitor to his country and the agent of a foreign power--France.

Your Honor will understand that I do not equate myself with these giants of our American past, for I

possess neither Thoreau's literary genius, nor the statesmanship of a Lincoln or a Jefferson. I merely point the obvious parallel: that citizens persecuted by their government, blacklisted, ostracized and jailed in 1950 may--in the fullness of time--be found to be, not in the minority, but in the vast majority of those Americans who cherish our freedoms and fight to preserve them.

In 1938, when I enlisted in the International Brigades of the Spanish Republican Army, I was convinced that I was helping to preserve my country from international fascism. When I stood before the House Committee in 1947, I considered that episode as merely another engagement in the same struggle.