Chapter VII

Swifter than a Weaver’s Shuttle:  
The Days of Canada Lee

*My days are swifter than a weaver’s shuttle.*

—The Book of Job

Four thousand mourners crowded into Harlem’s Salem Methodist Church on 13 May 1952. Six thousand more lined the streets of Seventh Avenue. Canada Lee was dead, dead before his time. Gone at 45, this pioneer actor had given his life as an activist. The working-class man and woman at the funeral sat next to such theatre luminaries as Oscar Hammerstein, II, Noble Sissle, Brooks Atkinson, Dick Campbell, Perry Watkins, Frank Silvera, Sidney Poitier, Frederick O’Neal, and Arnold Moss. Lee’s first wife, Juanita Canegata, and Frances Lee, his widow, were in attendance, as well.

It was a fitting tribute for an actor who gave too much to political causes, including his health, his elaborate home, and his finances. What ironic forces contributed to the early death of this pugilist, performer, and politician? Lee demanded roles on stage and screen that gave dignity to the Negro. He fought for soldiers of color and their rights. He attended civil rights rallies. He acted in and produced controversial plays. On 31 January 1946, Lee delivered to Congress 25,000 signatures asking for the ouster of Mississippi senator, Theodore G. Bilbo. As a result of speaking out too many times, the actor was blacklisted.

Fellow actor Kevin O’Morrison remembers Lee’s last days:

I called him to see him regularly . . . to talk with him as he lay under a sheet in the small, dark room to the rear of #235 [a parlor floor apartment on West
4th Street, New York City]. I came by to try to make him laugh, to sing old songs with him and other friends who fell by . . . making the small room seem even smaller, as we watched Canada's once-magnificent body waste under the sheet that covered his nakedness to just above his loins. Sometimes I succeeded in making him laugh—and when I did, the robustness of his laughter made it even more difficult to believe that we were at a death watch (25 Feb. 1980).

A death watch it was in more than one sense. Stefan Kanfer argued: "Overlooked by almost every theatrical or film historian, unmentioned by such retentive and bitter victims as Alvah Bessie and Dalton Trumbo, Lee is the Othello of the blacklist . . . its most afflicted and ignored victim . . . "(179).

Born Leonard Lionel Cornelius Canegata in New York on 3 May 1907, to James Cornelius and Lydia (Whaley) Canegata, Lee sprang from West Indian descent. His grandfather was an importer and ship owner in the West Indies. Lee had extraordinary advantages, including violin lessons, which he began at the age of seven with J. Rosamond Johnson, a distinguished African American composer. At 14, Canada Lee ran away from home to the Saratoga races and became a jockey at Belmont, Aqueduct, Jamaica, and on the Canadian circuit (Current Biography 1944 394). Overweight ended his jockey career, and Lee trained to be a prizefighter, winning 90 out of 100 amateur fights, as well as the title of national amateur lightweight.

At the age of 18, the athlete/musician married Juanita Waller, an African American, in December of 1925. Bart Lanier Stafford, III, wrote me:

It happens that I worked for many years with Juanita Canegata, Canada Lee's wife, in the Department of Welfare [in New York City]. She was a super lady, in the conventional sense of the word, meek and mild and obliging. . . . [T]here was a son who was supposed to be very bright (18 Sept. 1977).

Stafford also remembered in a letter of 6 April 1982:

Juanita Canegata is truly a genuine lady of the old school. . . . I can imagine her now in hat and gloves and starched little white collar and cuffs on her rather sedate dress . . . softspoken and cultured, she stands out among all of the people with whom I worked in NYC as the most well-bred.

Many have also referred to Canada Lee as an aristocrat.

The son to whom Stafford referred was Carl Vincent Lee who became an actor in his own right as an adult, with many kudos for his role of Blue Haven in Lonne Elder, III's Ceremonies in Dark Old Men. Carl Lee also