11. Pro-Unit Is Pro-Group

On April 10, 1952, Elia Kazan appeared in Executive Session before the House Committee on Un-American Activities. He had come to Washington at his own initiative “to amend the testimony” he had given about three months earlier when first subpoenaed by the Committee. The dignified Black man who had discreetly delivered him the “pink slip” ordering him to Washington on January 14, 1952, had confided sotto voce: “This will be a secret session. You don’t tell anyone, we don’t tell anyone. We expect you to be a cooperative witness” (A Life, 443). That Executive Session was not made public, but shortly after, a gossip column in the Hollywood Reporter carried a lead story that Kazan had confessed to “Commie membership,” but that he had refused to talk about any of his “old pals from the Group Theatre days.” That was the position he had intended to take, Kazan recalled in A Life, the autobiography in which he revealed his version of these traumatic happenings—from a distance of 35 years.

As his unwillingness to be a “cooperative witness” leaked out, however, Kazan felt “in the clutch of a dilemma” (A Life, 449). The Committee had indicated it would recall him, his Hollywood career seemed in jeopardy, his marriage to Molly Day Thacher was on the rocks, and his classic film A Streetcar Named Desire had just lost the Academy Award that seemed destined for it. Suddenly, what he described as his long-worn mask as a “progressive sympathizer” fell from his face. After consulting others like Arthur Miller and Lillian Hellman who were also preparing to face HUAC inquisitions, as well as Clifford Odets and Paula Miller Strasberg whom he would have to name, Kazan made what he called his “difficult decision.” He asked for an Executive Session of the Committee at which he presented a written statement that spelled it all out. He detailed his own membership in the Communist Party for a year and a half, from 1934 to 1936, the operation of a secret Communist Party Unit in the Group Theatre, its tasks, and its membership: Lewis Leverett, J. Edward Bromberg, Phoebe Brand, Morris Carnovsky, Tony Kraber, Paula Miller, Clifford Odets, and Art Smith. The story released by the Committee, including all the names and other details about the Group Theatre, appeared in the New York Times on April 12. On a previous page, in the theater section, appeared a startling two-column advertisement of self-justification placed by Kazan. He claimed that he made known the facts of his communist activities of 16 years ago in order to help America “protect” itself from a “dangerous and alien conspiracy.” He issued a call to others: “Secrecy serves the Communists . . . Liberals must speak out.”

With this action Kazan changed his destiny and that of many of his old friends in the Group. He became identified as “the epitome of a betrayer,” as Victor Navasky suggests in Naming Names, forever shadowed by the image of the informer. Some of his intimate Group collaborators became victims of the vicious blacklist, and
what remained of the unique Group spirit was shattered. In addition, the red label was from then on publicly stamped on the whole Group Theatre despite Kazan’s own attempted disclaimers. The issue of Communist Party involvement exposed by Kazan became part of the complex legacy of the company, became, for some, a handy tag to attach to the whole Group experience.

Important as the consequences of these hearings and revelations were, they do not provide a very solid basis for understanding radical politics in the Group. There was much more to the story than whether or not a member was willing to answer the famous question—“Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?” Yes, there was a Communist Unit in the Group. Kazan’s testimony was generally corroborated by Clifford Odets in his 1952 HUAC appearance and also by contemporary documents and later interviews. His list of members was probably accurate as well. And some of the activities he attributed to the Unit were probably carried out by Party members. But just what did the existence and activities of a Party Unit, revealed in the early 1950s during the height of the Korean War, the McCarthy Senate Hearings, and the jailing of Communist Party leaders, mean for the Group in the 1930s during the Depression, the Roosevelt New Deal, and the Popular Front?

Exploring radical activism in the Group is no easy task. In The Fervent Years Clurman suggested that the company moved left during the decade of its existence, but he never dealt directly with its heavy involvement in many so-called front groups and with the Communist Party itself. Issued in 1945 at the end of the war, Clurman’s manuscript was substantially cut, he said, because of the paper shortage. There is good reason to believe, however, that he also censored his original manuscript, which he claimed later was lost [the deletions are in the Butler Library at Columbia University], because he felt intimidated by the early anticommunist investigations already undertaken by the Tenney Committee in California and the Dies Committee in Washington. Herbert Kline, his close associate in the 1930s as editor of New Theatre Magazine, reported that shortly after publication, Clurman invited him to the Russian Tea Room, his home away from his nearby apartment on West 57th Street. According to Kline, Clurman wanted to “apologize” to him for the way he “chickened out about New Theatre.” Kline quoted Clurman as saying:

I realize how you must feel about my avoiding mention of the role of the magazine, the New Theatre League, and all of your cooperation with Lee, Cheryl, and myself in the Group Theatre. But my publishers insisted that I should avoid being open to ‘red-baiting.’ With my consent they cut an entire chapter about you, your brother Mark [Marvin], Molly [Kazan], Elia Kazan, and even my participation with Clifford and you in the early Lefty days.

Kline went on that Clurman explained “congressional committee terrorizing of writers and theatre and film leftists had frightened him as it had his publishers.” The story rings true. In the “Epilogue/ 1945–55” to the 1957 edition of The Fervent Years, Clurman acknowledges the “political constriction” that led to a “political hush,” without directly connecting the subsequent “cessation of all serious discussion” to the lacunae in his book. (FY, 305–306)