



Becoming Something: The Story of Canada Lee

Mona Z. Smith

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Becoming Something: The Story of Canada Lee Mona Z. Smith

The first biography of the great black actor, activist, athlete--and tragic victim of the blacklist

Imagine an actor as familiar to audiences as Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman are today--who is then virtually deleted from public memory. Such is the story of Canada Lee. Among the most respected black actors of the forties and a tireless civil rights advocate, Lee was unjustly dishonored, his name reduced to a footnote in the history of the McCarthy era, his death one of a handful directly attributable to the blacklist.

Born in Harlem in 1907, Lee was a Renaissance man. A musical prodigy on violin and piano at eleven, by thirteen he had become a successful jockey and by his twenties a champion boxer. After wandering into auditions for the WPA Negro Theater Project, Lee took up acting and soon shot to stardom in Orson Welles's Broadway production of *Native Son*, later appearing in such classic films as *Lifeboat* and the original *Cry, the Beloved Country*. But Lee's meteoric rise to fame was followed by a devastating fall. Labeled a Communist by the FBI and HUAC as early as 1943, Lee was pilloried during the notorious spy trial of Judith Coplon in 1949, then condemned in longtime friend Ed Sullivan's column. He died in 1952, forty-five and penniless, a heartbroken casualty of a dangerous and conflicted time. Now, after nearly a decade of research, Mona Z. Smith revives the legacy of a man who was perhaps the blacklist's most tragic victim.

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