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## Tracing the high price of principle

**"Trumbo: Red, White, and Blacklisted" at Burbank's Falcon Theatre plays through November 13.**

By Philip Brandes  
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"No one on either side who survived it came through untouched by evil," screenwriter Dalton Trumbo once said of the Hollywood blacklist that exacted an enormous professional and personal toll on himself and others during the 1940s and '50s.

Trumbo was one of the Hollywood Ten who spent a year in prison for refusing to answer questions before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Although Sen. Joe McCarthy's contemporaneous anti-communist witch hunts grabbed most of history's limelight, the damage inflicted by the committee and its climate of betrayal and fear was far more insidious and long-lasting.

That abuse of power casts a cautionary shadow over "Trumbo: Red, White, and Blacklisted," a compelling portrait of the man and his times at Burbank's Falcon Theatre. Skillfully compiled by Trumbo's son, Christopher, from his dad's speeches and correspondence, "Trumbo" was conceived for script-in-hand performance by rotating celebrities, à la "Love Letters."

There's nothing casual or nonchalant, however, about Joe Mantegna's pitch-perfect reading. Under Peter Askin's assured direction, Mantegna's smooth vocal inflections and sharp-edged nuances mine pathos, wit, crankiness and wisdom from Trumbo's revelatory communications to friends, family and adversaries.

Starting with Trumbo's heroically defiant House testimony, the play traces the high price he paid for principles. After release from prison, Trumbo spent 13 unemployable years writing screenplays under pseudonyms (winning two Oscars), before a thawing climate allowed him to return to the Hollywood fold in 1960.

For Trumbo, even trivial matters warranted impeccably crafted - often acerbic - treatment. Refusing support from a colleague who professed affection despite their political differences, he derides his would-be benefactor's hypocrisy.

Yet he also shows great heart and generosity. A missive offering advice in love to college-aged Christopher becomes a riotously funny self-deprecating confessional about his own sexually repressed youth.

Focusing on a narrow selection of longer letters and speeches read in their entirety, "Trumbo" celebrates the complex, probing and deeply moving epistolary form of person-to-person communication.

Mantegna is well established as the foremost enunciator of meticulous wordsmith David Mamet's most demanding texts, so it's no surprise to hear him smoothly navigate the intricate syntax of Trumbo's carefully crafted prose. Jeffrey Donovan, in the guise of Christopher and other peripheral voices, provides background narration and context with a gracious, respectful supporting performance.

Along with Eric Bentley's docudrama "Are You Now or Have You Ever Been," "Trumbo" may be the best stage document of the devastation wrought by the House committee's hearings. For most viewers, it provides an essential lesson from an all-but-forgotten past. And judging from the faces of a few Hollywood veterans in the audience for whom the blacklist era is still living history, "Trumbo" truthfully hits its mark.

### **'Trumbo: Red, White, and Blacklisted'**

**Where:** Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank  
**When:** 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, 4 p.m. Sundays  
**Ends:** Nov. 13  
**Price:** \$30 to \$37.50  
**Contact:** (818) 955-8101 or [www.falcontheatre.com](http://www.falcontheatre.com)  
**Running time:** 1 hour, 45 minutes

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