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Filmmaker Recovers Life and Legacy of Forgotten Actor/Activist Canada Lee

East Hampton, NY – 17 July 2009 – Canada Lee (1907-1952), social activist and groundbreaking stage and screen actor, was a household name in his lifetime – yet few of us have heard of him, or his accomplishments. First-time documentary filmmaker Kenneth Kilfara hopes to change this fact with his film *Canada Lee – Man Out Front*, currently in production.

A gifted actor in the years following the Harlem Renaissance, Canada Lee shunned the stereotypical “step and fetch it” roles available to black actors so prevalent during that time. His portrayal of empowered, sympathetic black characters onscreen was critical in shaping opportunities for future generations of black actors, such as Sidney Poitier. But as an outspoken black celebrity during the Red Scare, Lee was labeled “too controversial” by the government, and consequently the media. Thus Lee’s career and his legacy were all but erased from the history books. While many of us are aware of the life and achievements of Lee’s peer Paul Robeson, there is less awareness of the equally important battle that Lee fought. As Ossie Davis recollected during the commemoration of the Canada Lee Memorial at the Museum for the City of New York, “Canada represented a new kind of black man, aggressive, proud and dangerous.”

Kilfara initially interviewed Lee’s widow, Frances Lee Pearson, while she was developing a personal biography of Lee’s life, until her death at age 85 in December, 2005. Frances Pearson shared her memories of Lee’s struggles to be the dignified actor and dangerously outspoken humanitarian that he wanted to be during the “dark days” of McCarthyism. “Frances watched it steal away her husband’s life,” says Kilfara of the pressure Canada Lee faced in being wrongly accused as a Communist sympathizer.

In early 2006, Award-winning documentary filmmaker Tim Nackashi and photojournalist Jim Virga joined with Kilfara to realize this filmic exploration of Lee’s life. Kilfara, Nackashi and Virga traveled to Philadelphia to interview Canada Lee’s close personal friend Leslie Nash.

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In late 2006, Kilfara introduced this project to historian Howard Zinn who agreed to be interviewed for the film regarding the context for the relationship between public perception of Communism and the arts in early 1900's society. Kilfara, Nackashi and Virga conducted interviews with Zinn and historians Ed Guerrero and Glenda Gill. To date, the production also includes interviews with: Earle Hyman (actor), William Greaves (filmmaker/friend of Canada Lee's), James Hatch (historian), Beullah Bullock (Lee family friend), and Oscar Brand (former boxer).

In 2007, Kilfara spoke at the Civil Liberties Defense Council in Oregon about Lee's fight and manipulations by the FBI. Later that year, Kilfara was interviewed by Film Threat Magazine and spoke at the 10th Annual Conference and Awards Banquet of the National Black Herstory Taskforce. While there, Kilfara screened the film trailer and accepted an award on behalf of Lee. In 2008, the film received grants from both the Pacific Pioneer Fund and the Yip Harburg Foundation. In 2009, Kilfara was interviewed by The East Hampton Star and received a grant from the Jean-Claude Baker Foundation.

This Kilfara film project is sanctioned by the Canada Lee Estate and the Canada Lee Heritage Foundation as the only authorized story of Lee's life, and it is being made with the in-kind support of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in New York City, which houses Canada Lee's photo and manuscript archives.

Completion funds and contact info for potential interviewees are currently being sought.

For additional information about the project or how to contribute, contact Kenneth Kilfara at (818) 915-9795 or kilfara@canadaleedoc.com.

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Canada and Frances walk together along the streets of Madrid, Spain in 1949. Jim Crowism, so prevalent in America, frequently prevented them from going out together near their home in New York City.