

Perfect Arrangement

by Topher Payne

Education
Packet



About the Play

“It’s 1950, and new colors are being added to the Red Scare. Two US State Department employees, Bob & Norma, have been tasked with identifying sexual deviants within their ranks. There’s just one problem: Both Bob & Norma are gay and have married each other’s partners as a carefully constructed cover. Inspired by the true story of the earliest stirrings of the American gay rights movement, madcap classic sitcom-style laughs give way to provocative drama as two “All-American” couples are forced to stare down the closet door.”

Topher Payne, the playwright of *Perfect Arrangement*, is an American writer based in Atlanta, Georgia. In addition to his plays, he also has a children’s literature series that offer alternative endings to classic stories, such as *The Tree Who Set Healthy Boundaries* (based on Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree*). Other plays by Payne include *Evelyn in Purgatory*, *Let Nothing You Dismay*, and *The Only Light in Reno*, which takes place in a Reno Hotel the night of Marilyn Monroe’s death.

Read more about him at topherpayne.com



Topher Payne
Source: Horizon Theatre Company

The Red Scare: A Review

Perfect Arrangement takes place in Washington D.C. in the Spring of 1950. This time in US history is marked by the early Cold War, the beginning of the Korean War, and very importantly, the rise of McCarthyism during the Second **Red Scare**. The Red Scare was a moral panic of the perceived threat posed by Communists in the U.S. This movement, led by Joseph McCarthy, led to the political repression and persecution of federal employees thought to be communist. Separate from McCarthy, the **House Un-American Activities Committee** (HUAC) was created to investigate supposed “disloyalty” among government workers, union members, educators, and especially celebrities in Hollywood. During the investigations, suspects were pressured to identify others who may have communist ties, leading to more investigations and unjust persecution. Across the country, there was an atmosphere of suspicion. In the years that HUAC was most active, tens of thousands of people were investigated. This moral panic, which lasted from 1947 to 1957, resulted in the termination, forced resignation, and blacklisting of up to 5,000 government employees., leading to devastating, long-term career impacts. This era of persecution is sequel to the First Red Scare, which took place between 1917 and 1920.

Does this sound familiar to you? You may have already studied the Red Scare in your US History class when discussing communism in the mid-1900s. You may have also come across the Red Scare when studying *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller in your English class.



Senator Joseph McCarthy
Source: Bettmann / Getty

The Lavender Scare

At the same time as the Red Scare was the **Lavender Scare**, the systematic removal of LGBTQ+ individuals from government positions. The term “Lavender Scare” was first coined by David K. Johnson, one of the most foundational historians of gay political persecution in America. Johnson derived the “Lavender Scare” from Senator Everett Dirksen’s derogatory description of gay men.

“We are going to have a real housecleaning. You are going to have a Republican administration, and by God, they're going to knock the lavender lads out of the State Department.” - Senator Everett Dirksen, 1952

Many that were thought to be LGBTQ+, especially in the State Department, were targeted under the belief that their sexual orientation made them security risks. These ideas had no real basis, and were likely spurred by the stigmatization and fears of homosexuality. The U.S. government publicly labeled homosexuality as a moral weakness and a mental illness, which reinforced homophobic norms. According to Johnson, up to 10,000 individuals were affected across the federal government, though the exact number is impossible to derive because much of the data has been erased.

"More people were discharged for being homosexual than for being communists... despite the lack of any evidence that gay men and lesbians posed a threat to national security." - David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare* (2004)

Who was involved?

Senator Joseph McCarthy targeted LGBTQ+ individuals as security risks. He asserted that homosexuals were more vulnerable to blackmail and other threats, contributing to moral panic across the country.



Senator Joseph McCarthy.
Source: WNYC



President Dwight D. Eisenhower
Source: National Review

President Dwight D. Eisenhower issued Executive Order 10450 in 1953, which banned “sexual perversion from any federal office. This systemically codified discrimination against gay men and women throughout the US government.

Section 8 (a) The investigations conducted pursuant to this order shall be designed to develop information as to whether the employment or retention in employment in the Federal service of the person being investigated is clearly consistent with the interests of the national security. Such information shall relate, but shall not be limited, to the following:

(iii) Any criminal, infamous, dishonest, immoral, or notoriously disgraceful conduct, habitual use of intoxicants to excess, drug addiction, or sexual perversion.

Executive Order 10450. Source: The National Archives

Roy Cohn played a major role in McCarthy’s anti-Communist hearings, but simultaneously acted as a central figure in the rooting out of LGBTQ+ employees. While he adamantly denied any deviation in his sexuality, he was widely believed to be gay, revealing a deep irony within the Lavender Scare.



Roy Cohn
Source: The New Yorker

Who was affected?

Throughout the Lavender Scare, up to 10,000 federal employees were fired or forced to resign because of alleged homosexuality. Although a great number of people were persecuted, many of the victims of the Lavender Scare were never publicly named. Because of the shame, secrecy, and erasure involved, many of the stories we know about these individuals are of those of brave resisters, whistleblowers, and those that were later recognized. Beyond firing, others were politically targeted, socially outcast, and died by suicide after being ousted by the US government.

Frank Kameny was an astronomer fired from his government job in 1957 for being gay. He quickly became one of the first openly gay activists in the U.S., taking his job dismissal to the Supreme Court, and founded the earliest national gay rights organization in the US, The Mattachine Society.



Source: The National WWII Museum

Madeleine Tress was a business economist who was fired in 1958 for being a lesbian while working in the Department of Commerce. She was interrogated by federal investigators, pressured to confess her sexuality, and ultimately lost her job. She later became a successful attorney and remained an active LGBTQ+ rights activist until her death in 2009.



Source: Legacy.com

Helen Gahagan Douglas was an LGBTQ+ ally, and faced attacks during her 1950 Senate campaign, alleging that her gay allyship made her “soft on perverts.” This demonstrates how even allies could be attacked during this time.

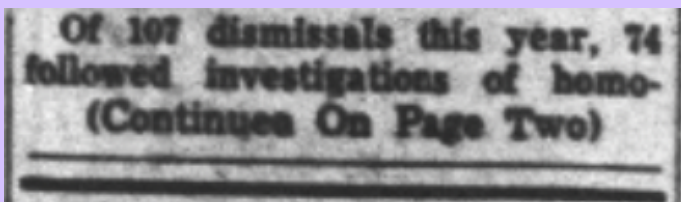


Source: Los Angeles Times

The Lavender Scare: Primary Source Analysis

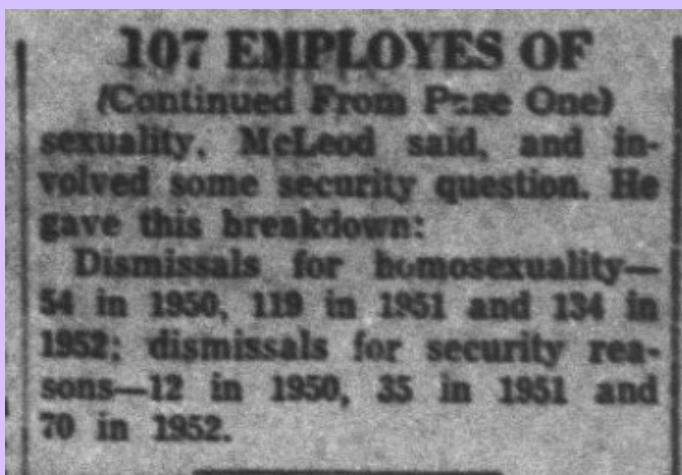
The image below is a clipping from The Key West Citizen, a Florida news outlet, on July 2, 1953. The excerpt is from an article headlined “**107 Employees of State Dept. Fired In ‘53.**” After reading, consider the following questions:

- Out of the 107 employees fired, how many were dismissed for homosexuality in 1953? How might the calendar date of this article (reference paragraph above) affect this number?
- How does this number compare with the record of dismissals for homosexuality in previous years?
- How does this number compare with dismissals for security reasons?
- What might these numbers reveal about the federal government’s attitude toward those they thought to be homosexual?



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(Continued On Page Two)

“Of 107 dismissals this year, 74 followed investigations of homosexuality, McLeod said, and involved some security question. He gave this breakdown:

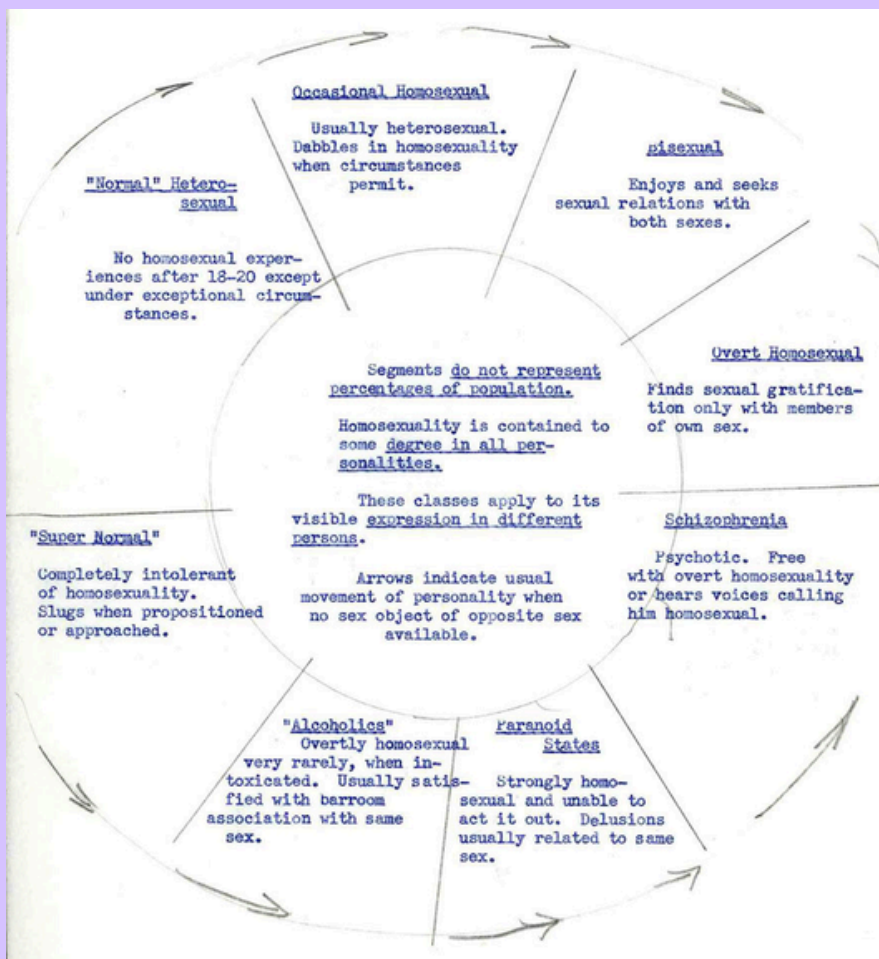


107 EMPLOYEES OF
(Continued From Page One)
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The Lavender Scare: Primary Source Analysis

The image below is labeled “The Lavender Wheel” by the National Archives. Captain George Raines, a professor of psychiatry at Georgetown University, presented this wheel to a Senate committee that was trying to determine if homosexuals were a security risk. Raines used this wheel to help assert that homosexuals were well-adjusted and not inherently disordered, a very liberal view at the time. After reading, consider the questions below.



- How does the information and language differ from your understanding of LGBTQ+? Why might this information and language have changed over time?
- How might the sentence “Homosexuality is contained to some degree in all personalities” support Raines’ argument?
- What does this wheel suggest about the general understanding of homosexuality across the country in 1950?

During the Show

There is no photography or recording of any kind allowed during the performance. Silence your phone and refrain from texting, as it can be distracting to those around you or on stage.

No outside food or drink is allowed in the theater. However, any purchases made at our concession stand can be enjoyed in the theater during the show. Please remain seated throughout the duration of the play.

There will be a 15-minute intermission between acts, which would be a great time to check your phone, go to the bathroom, grab some snacks, or talk about the play.

Timeliness is key! It is important to arrive *before* the show's start time (7:30pm for preview and evening shows, 2:00pm for Sunday matinees). Consider arriving earlier to beat the lines and snag good parking. Doors open thirty minutes before curtain.

Parking: Do not park between our building and the red brick building on the east side of Reno Little Theater (you will be towed). Street parking is available but limited.



About the Production

Why "Perfect Arrangement?"- a statement from the Artistic Leadership Committee of Reno Little Theater:

This play, which has been produced in 38 states and 6 countries, is a new take on madcap romantic relationship stories in the style of a 1950's sitcom. It is timely, slightly political, funny, and fast-paced. We also have direct contact with the playwright and are hoping to be able to get them out for this production!

Perfect Arrangement by Topher Payne is being produced by Reno Little Theater at 147 E. Pueblo St. Reno, NV. The show runs from Friday, April 11 to Sunday, May 4, with a preview on Wednesday, April 9, and a post-show talkback with the audience on Sunday, April 20.

For more information about the production and Reno Little Theater, visit renolittletheater.org.

For any questions about the education packet, please contact luis@renolittletheater.org

