

# **CIVIL LIBERTIES AT THE OSCARS: THE POLITICS BEHIND THE CEREMONY**

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**January 15, 2015**

When you sit down to watch the annual Academy Awards ceremony on Sunday, February 22nd, you probably won't be thinking about civil liberties or political controversies. But in fact, there is a rich and fascinating history of civil liberties events on Oscar night. Actually, this should not really be surprising. The movies are a part of American culture and, as a consequence, intertwined with political controversies.

One of the major themes in these Oscar controversies involves attacks on the political beliefs and associations of some of the film world's greatest artists and films and most highly regarded films. Many careers were destroyed, and we were all denied an unknown number of good or even great films.

Here are some of the more notable events. (You can learn more about these and other events, including the long history of film censorship at **Today in Civil Liberties History**:

<http://todayinclh.com/?s=movies>

## **Who the Hell is "Robert Rich"? March 27, 1957**

When "Robert Rich" was announced as the winner of the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay for *The Brave One* on March 27, 1957, no one came forward to accept the award. People began to ask, "Who the hell is Robert Rich?" In fact, "Rich" was a pseudonym for blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo. Trumbo had been one of the Hollywood Ten who were blacklisted in 1947 for refusing to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in its inquiry into alleged Communist influence in Hollywood. Trumbo and his fellow Hollywood Ten colleagues were cited for contempt, sentenced to prison, and blacklisted by the film industry.

It is very likely that a number of Academy members knew the real story and voted for "Rich"/Trumbo as a protest against the blacklist.

Trumbo survived, as did some other writers, working under pseudonyms for a fraction of their former fees. Actors were not so lucky; after all, there is no pseudonym for your face. Trumbo was instrumental in breaking the blacklist when in early 1960 Producer/Director Otto Preminger publicly announced that he would write the screenplay for *Exodus*.

Dalton Trumbo finally received his Oscar for *The Brave One* on May 2, 1975. In 1993 he was posthumously awarded the Oscar for his screenplay for *Roman Holiday* (Ian McLellan Hunter had served as a front for Trumbo's work on the film).

### **Brando Doesn't Show; Sends a Native American Spokeswoman in His Place. March 27, 1973**

To protest the treatment of Native Americans in the movies and American society generally, actor Marlon Brando refused to appear at the Academy Awards ceremony on March 27, 1973 to accept the Best Actor Oscar for his performance in *The Godfather*. Sacheen Littlefeather appeared in his place, and from the podium read a statement on behalf of Native American rights.

Nine years earlier, Brando participated in a Native American "fish-in" to protest the denial of tribal fishing rights in the northwest.

### **Charlie Chaplin Returns from Twenty Years of Exile to Receive Honorary Oscar. April 10, 1972**

After a twenty year absence from the U.S. because the U.S. government had revoked his visa, silent film great Charlie Chaplin appeared at the Academy Awards ceremony on April 10, 1972 to receive an Honorary Oscar for "the incalculable effect he has had in making motion pictures the art form of this century." The audience gave the 83-year old Chaplin a 12 minute standing ovation.

Chaplin had never become an American citizen, held a British passport, and worked in the U.S. on a visa. When he sailed to England for the London premier of *Limelight*, in 1952 the U.S. State Department revoked his visa. Chaplin had been under attack because of his leftist political beliefs and various charges of immoral conduct. As he was sailing to England, the U.S. Attorney General declared that he could return if he could "prove this worth" to the U.S.

*Limelight* was re-released in the United States in 1972, and Chaplin, along with Raymond Rasch and Larry Russell, won the Academy Award for Best Original Score at the 1973 Oscar ceremonies. The film was eligible for an Oscar because it had never been shown in Los Angeles in 1952, a requirement for eligibility (playing only in some east coast cities).

### **Elia Kazan Given Honorary Oscar; Reopens Old Cold War Wounds. March 21, 1999**

Elia Kazan, the noted director of *Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *On the Waterfront* (1954), was awarded an Honorary Oscar for Lifetime Achievement on March 21, 1999 amid a controversy that reopened old Cold War wounds. An estimated 250 people picketed the ceremony, while some people in the audience, including actors Ed Harris and Nick Nolte, refused to stand when he was presented with the award.

The controversy involved Kazan's testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) on April 10, 1952, when he named eight people he had known years before as having been members of the Communist Party. The HUAC demand that witnesses "name names" was one of the most degrading rituals of the Cold War, because it forced people to become stool pigeons as the price they had to pay to "clear" themselves and preserve their careers. Being "named" by HUAC had serious consequences. People named as Communists, or who refused to testify about their own politics, were blacklisted and barred from working in the film industry.

Kazan's HUAC testimony became part of a bitter personal and artistic feud between Kazan and his friend and colleague playwright Arthur Miller. Kazan had directed Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, widely regarded as one of the greatest American plays. Miller wrote the play *The Crucible* (1953) about the Salem Witch Hunt in the 1690s as an allegory of the anti-Communist witch hunt in the Cold War. After his HUAC testimony, Kazan directed *On the Waterfront* to justify testifying before investigating committees. The film ends with Marlon Brando testifying before a committee investigating labor union racketeering. The parallel does not really work, however, since testifying about actual criminal acts is quite different from implicating people because of their political beliefs and associations.

When Miller was called to testify before HUAC on June 21, 1956, he refused to answer the Committee's questions on First Amendment grounds and was then convicted of contempt of Congress. The conviction was subsequently overturned on appeal. At the time of his testimony, Miller was married to Marilyn Monroe. Reportedly the Chair of HUAC told Miller that his problems could "go away" if he, the Chair, could have his picture taken with Monroe. Miller refused.

### **High Noon Wins Four Oscars Amid Civil Liberties Controversies On and Off Screen. March 19, 1953**

*High Noon*, widely regarded as one of the greatest American films of all time, is considered a commentary on the anti-Communist hysteria of the Cold War: fearful people refusing to step forward to help defend the values of their community. On this night, it won four Oscars: Best Actor (Gary Cooper); Best Score; Best Song ("Do Not Forsake Me"); and Best Editing. It was also nominated for Best Picture, but did not win.

Cold War controversies swirled around the film. Associate Producer and screenwriter Carl Foreman was called to testify before the House Un-American Activities (HUAC) while the film was in production. As a result, Producer/Director Stanley Kramer removed Foreman's name as Associate

Producer from the credits, although he did leave his name on as screenwriter. Foreman was soon blacklisted by the film industry and barred from working in the industry.

Foreman later secretly worked as co-screenwriter on the acclaimed film *Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) along with Michael Wilson, who was also blacklisted at the time. This led to the bizarre spectacle at the 1958 Oscar ceremonies, with the French author Pierre Boulle, who could not speak or write English, accepting the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay (see below). In 1984, the Academy added Foreman' and Wilsons names to the award.

**Ring Lardner, Jr. Blacklist Victim, Wins Oscar for M\*A\*S\*H. April 15, 1971.**

Ring Lardner, Jr., who as a member of the "Hollywood Ten" had been blacklisted in 1947, won the Oscar on this night for Best Adapted Screenplay for *M\*A\*S\*H*. Lardner had been convicted of contempt of Congress and then imprisoned for refusing to testify about his political associations before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1947. He famously told the committee that he could answer its questions but "I would hate myself in the morning."

*M\*A\*S\*H* was also nominated for four other Oscars. In addition to being a huge box office success as a thinly veiled commentary on the Vietnam War, *M\*A\*S\*H* later became an extremely popular network television series.

**Pierre Boulle Wins Oscar for *Bridge on the River Kwai* Screenplay – But Can't Write or Speak English. March 26, 1958.**

At the 1958 Academy Awards ceremony, the French writer Pierre Boulle *was* awarded the Oscar from Best Adapted Screenplay for the acclaimed film *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. There was just one problem: Boulle, who wrote the original novel, could neither speak nor write English. In fact, the *Kwai* screenplay was written by blacklisted writers Carl Foreman (see his role with *High Noon*, above) and Michael Wilson (see his script for *The Planet of the Apes*, below).

*Kwai* won a total of seven Oscars, including Best Film, Best Director, Best Actor, and Boulle's award for Best Screenplay Adapted from Another Medium.

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences finally gave Foreman and Wilson credit for their script in 1984, and their names appear in the credits in subsequent reissues of the film on videotape and DVD.

**"Planet of the Americans:" Blacklisted Screenwriter Takes His Revenge. April 15, 1969.**

Screenwriter Michael Wilson was blacklisted in 1952 after refusing to name names before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). He finally returned to work in the 1960s and wrote the screenplay for the original *Planet of the Apes* (1968). He included in the script a wicked parody of HUAC in which an imprisoned Carleton Heston appears naked before what is essentially an “Un-Ape Activities Committee.” The outrageous questions make the committee (and by implication, HUAC) look like complete fools. (The scene appears a little more than an hour into the film, in case you want to skip to it directly.)

*Planet of the Apes* was nominated for two Academy Awards, but did not win in either category.

Wilson worked anonymously on films while blacklisted, including as co-screenwriter on *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. The French novelist Pierre Boulle won the Oscar for the script despite not being able to speak or write English. Wilson and co-screenwriter Carl Foreman, who was also blacklisted, were finally given official credit for the script by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in 1984.

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## More

The story of the Hollywood blacklist is told in the film *Hollywood on Trial* (1976), which includes interviews with a number of blacklist victims.

Woody Allen explored the blacklist in the television industry in *The Front* (1976), focusing on the practice of writers working anonymously with a “front” (Woody Allen in the film) serving as the official writer.

The insidious HUAC ritual of compelling people to “name names” is examined in Victor Navasky’s classic book *Naming Names* (1980).

**Learn more about this history of civil liberties and the movies, including the long history of censorship at: <http://todayinlh.com/?s=movies>**

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