David Walsh looks at the San Francisco film festival

Blacklisted film director John Berry honored

David Walsh
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This is the last in a series of articles about the 1998 San Francisco International Film Festival

As part of its effort to acquaint the public with the work of film-makers who have faced censorship or repression, this year's San Francisco film festival presented several films by John Berry, an American film director blacklisted in the anticommunist witch-hunts of the early 1950s.

Berry, born in 1917, was a performer from childhood. He joined Orson Welles's legendary Mercury Theatre Troupe in 1937. He acted in Welles's famous modern-dress version of *Julius Caesar*, played Poins to Welles's Falstaff in *Five Kings*, and stage-managed and acted in Mercury's stage adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son*. When Welles headed off to Hollywood in 1940 to make *Citizen Kane*, Berry was left in charge of the theater company.

In 1943 he followed Welles into the film industry. He was first hired by John Houseman to direct a film with Lillian Gish and Veronica Lake, *Miss Susie Slagle's*, for Paramount. He followed that up with a soap opera, *From This Day Forward*, with Joan Fontaine; *Cross My Heart*, a comedy with Betty Hutton; *Casbah*, a musical remake of *Pépé le Moko* and *Algiers*; and then two of the films screened in San Francisco, *Tension* (1949) and *He Ran All the Way* (1951). He also did part-time work on a number of other films, including filling in for director Max Ophuls, when the latter was ill, on the set of *Caught*.

Tension is a remarkable little crime drama, with Richard Basehart as a pharmacist whose promiscuous wife (Audrey Totter) leaves him for another man. Basehart plans the perfect murder of his wife's lover, but loses his nerve. When the man is killed he becomes the prime suspect. Barry Sullivan plays the policeman hot on the trail, and a young Cyd Charisse makes an appearance as Basehart's new love. Berry directed *Tension* with obvious relish. Slight though it is, the film is lively, tangy, with a mischievous sense of humor.

He Ran All the Way is a more ambitious project, an attempt at a larger statement about American life. John Garfield, in his last film, plays a hoodlum on the run. He and a pal (Norman Lloyd) carry out a payroll robbery. The latter is killed during the heist, partly at least because Garfield's character panics; he shoots and wounds a policeman, who later dies. Garfield picks up a girl (Shelley Winters) at a public swimming pool and hides out in her apartment, eventually taking her entire family hostage.

In the course of the following night and day he oscillates between trust in the girl and paranoia, between wanting to be accepted in the family and intense aggression. His own background has been harsh and unloving. Garfield's mother (Gladys George) urges the cops who come to question her to find him and kill him. For her part, the girl is alternately attracted and repulsed by this man on the run. At first she is thrilled by his attentions. After he reveals who he is and what he's done, she asks her parents, "How could I make such a mistake? There must be something wrong with me." The next day, as the police begin to close in, he says, "You go for me, don't you. Why don't we get out of here?" With his money she buys a car and they make plans to get away. Does she care for him or is this simply a way to get her family out of danger? Or is it both? It's hard to tell. In the end, he dies in the gutter in front of the family's apartment building in a pool of dirty water.

Garfield's character in Berry's film is similar in certain respects to those he played in Robert Rossen's *Body and Soul* and Abe Polonsky's *Force of Evil*: the clever, individualist working class kid who is corrupted or turns to crime in search of a quick way out of poverty—and comes to grief.

Berry's Hollywood career was cut short by the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings into Communist Party influence in the film industry. He was named by director Edward Dmytryk, among others. To avoid a subpoena from the Committee, Berry left for France where he has lived ever since. In the mid-1950s he directed two films with Eddie Constantine, *Ça va barder* (1953) and *Je suis un Sentimental* (1955). Berry directed *Tamango*, a film about a slave rebellion with Dorothy Dandridge, in 1958. He has also directed plays and acted in films, notably Bertrand Tavernier's *Round Midnight*.

I had the opportunity to speak with Berry in San Francisco.

He was born Jak Szold in the Bronx. "My father," he explained in a conversation over breakfast, "was a volcano." A Jewish immigrant from a part of Poland then ruled by the Austro-Hungarian empire, Berry's father began as a busboy at Ratner's restaurant, later built up his own business to the point where he owned 28 restaurants, went broke and "went back to work at Ratner's at 74. At 84 he was fired. He died at 93."

His mother was Romanian. "She was," Berry says, "lusty, ribald, a fantastic entertainer." Her dream of being an actress was blocked by his father. "She was disgracefully in love with my father who led her a terrible existence." Having given up her career as an actor, "she shifted some of that to me."

Berry first performed in public at the age of four; at eleven or twelve he was doing a stint in vaudeville. At fifteen he got a job on the social staff of a hotel in the Catskills where he watched and met Milton Berle and Danny Kaye, among others. He himself performed as a stand-up comic.

His stint with Welles's Mercury Theatre was obviously a critical event. Berry describes Welles as his "spiritual father" and speaks with a good deal of feeling about him. "He was a rebel, a maverick. He was a truly generous human being, in spite of all the stories about his

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egomania. There was one thing he did teach me—when you're engaged in a project you must devote yourself totally."

"Orson would demand the most outrageous things, incredible things. There was the time he wanted chalk in the middle of the night. Another time at two o'clock in the morning he told me, go get an American flag. In the deepest voice. If you hesitated, he'd say: [Berry imitated the booming voice] 'Are you going to betray me, too?' I went to Brooklyn, I woke a guy up at five in the morning. Orson wanted the flag for the set."

I asked Berry what he thought had created that atmosphere, in which people like Welles and he, and many others, were prepared to dedicate themselves, without thought of money or career, to their work. "It was an historic period in which the responsibility people felt for each other was ingrained, by necessity, by the circumstances. You had to be together to find food, work. And there was the threat of fascism, Nazism, the war in Spain."

Berry and Welles remained friends as long as the latter was alive. I asked Berry how he thought Welles—obliged in his later years to do television commercials and make inane talk show appearances to get by financially—felt towards the end about his own life and career. In response, he told me a story.

The Mercury Theatre was performing in Chicago in 1939; Welles was 25 at the time. Berry, Welles and some others went to see John Barrymore, the renowned actor, in a second-rate piece, *My Dear Children*. Berry thinks Barrymore was "enamored" of some young woman in the cast. "He was playing an old lover, some goddamn thing. He was ridiculous, except when he did *Hamlet*. Orson loved Barrymore, he was a great admirer."

Later they were walking back to wherever they were staying. "A quiet street, at two in the morning. It was a melancholy evening, with a hint of spring rain. I turned to Orson and said, 'How can a man of that talent, temperament, quality, become such a buffoon? Isn't that frightening?' Orson put his hand around my shoulder, his big paw, and looked down. He said, 'What do you think's going to happen to me?'"

I asked Berry why he had moved to the political left. "You could go in two different directions," he replied. "You could become a total reactionary, 'Let's kick the hell out of the Reds,' or move the other way. The war in Spain was terribly important. You knew it was a prelude to World War II. People destroyed by Nazi airplanes. I felt the need for change. People were starving, in this country which had great riches. I saw things that were incredible. When I was a kid black people were totally dismissed."

I asked Berry about John Garfield, who died of heart attack on the eve of a scheduled appearance before HUAC. In another interview I had read Berry had suggested that he thought Garfield, who was feverishly, desperately burning the candle at both ends just before his death, was preparing to inform.

He responded, "Rumor had it that he was facing five years in the can if he didn't give names. It's easy to be heroic when you're not facing that. It's one hell of a choice. They would say to you, 'Name names, we have them all, anyway.' It's a lie. People I met in the Resistance were told the same thing. 'Just give one piece of information, give us a small piece.' But it never stops. It was an abuse of power.

"We thought, at the time, to have to won the war, to have fought for those correct causes.... We thought there was going to be an expanding, a widening of horizons. There would be a much stronger sense of the people. America's prosperity was so incredible. Two years later, everything was turned into its opposite."

So people in his circle had been caught by surprise, had been unprepared for the witch-hunts?

"Yeah," he said, "and how."

How had he learned that he was blacklisted?

"I learned that I was blacklisted because although I was not engaged with a political party ... I did have a very strong vision of rights and liberties. I was very active. I did a memorial to the Spanish Civil War veterans which I directed and in which I acted. I had opposed the Dies Committee, HUAC. I knew the ax was going to fall.

"I was interviewed for a job by a guy at Warner Brothers, a producer. The questions he asked me made it very clear that they were gathering information about me. He was one of the gatherers probably working for the Committee. He made racist remarks, he tried to provoke me.

"People had all sorts of motives. The agent I went there with, I'd had an affair with a girl he was going with while he'd been out of town. People used the blacklist to settle all sorts of scores, they denounced other people for their own personal gain. There was jealousy among actors, writers."

Did he feel he had been on his own facing the blacklist?

"I did not accept the majority line [of those opposing HUAC]. The official line of the CP, non-CP, worked out by the attorneys, was to take the Fifth Amendment. To me, it had a connotation that suggested some wrongdoing. You always say when somebody does that, what are they hiding? I wanted to say that I had never been involved in a plot, that my political life was entirely open, and that I had the right to think and act as I wanted as long as I didn't harm anyone.

"A friend of mine said, 'It might not be six months [in jail], it could be for years. You've got to know that you could crack.' I think I'm enough of a resister. I don't think I would have cracked. Anyway, he told me to go out on the road for a while—some guys had already been sentenced. So I went, as if I were a dangerous criminal. I did that for six weeks. Then I made my way to France. I thought I'd be gone three or four months. I was 11 years without coming back."

I asked Berry if he had encountered critics of the Soviet regime and Stalinism in the 1930s. He indicated that he had. What had been his reaction? I thought his response was relatively honest and revealing. "We dismissed it, we dismissed it. You accepted what was going on as necessary. We were all involved in our own lives. 'Have another Cuba libre.' That's part of your responsibility."

At the age of 80 Berry remains active and energetic. He was accompanied to San Francisco by French actress Ariane Kah, with whom he is attempting to organize backing for a film project about the French Resistance during World War II.

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