

Conversations with blacklisted screenwriter Walter Bernstein ...

David Walsh
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Walter Bernstein was born in Brooklyn in 1919. After graduation from Dartmouth, he wrote regularly for the *New Yorker* and during World War II, the G.I. weekly, *Yank*. After demobilization he returned to magazine writing, before going to Hollywood to work as a screenwriter, first with director Robert Rossen. He had collaborated on only one screenplay before he was blacklisted in 1950. He wrote extensively for television over the next decade, not being able to return to film writing until 1959. His scripts include *The Magnificent Seven* (uncredited, 1960), *The Money Trap* (1966), *The Molly Maguires* (1970), *The Front* (1976) and *Semi-Tough* (1977).

DW: What is your reaction to the Academy's decision?

WB: It's the same as it has always has been, I don't think they should give Kazan an award. It's true, it's been a long time, but this was a man who damaged the industry that is now giving him the award.

DW: It's a lifetime achievement. Turning informer was a pretty critical element of his lifetime achievement.

WB: Yes, I think so. Even without that, I don't think you can separate the two. He was called to testify as this prominent director. That's what he testified as. He hurt a lot of people.

DW: Did he play a major role in legitimizing the witch-hunt?

WB: I don't know how major, you know, he was a feather in their cap, in that he was the hottest theater and film director in the country at the time. He had directed *Death of a Salesman*, *Streetcar*, he won an Oscar for *Gentleman's Agreement*. So he represented quite a triumph for them.

DW: Was he the most prestigious director that testified?

WB: I think so, probably.

DW: What was the immediate impact of his action, if any?

WB: I think he was condemned certainly by people in the theater and people who had worked with him. And there was a lot of surprise at what he did, because it wasn't a case of someone, say, who could only have worked in Hollywood and who informed to keep working. Kazan could have worked in the theater, he could have worked in Europe.

DW: He gave a variety of reasons, of course--

WB: Oh, I never believed any of them.

DW: Is there any doubt that he did it simply to save his career?

WB: He's a very complex fellow.

DW: Do you think he believes there was some other reason?

WB: I don't know what he believes. If you read his autobiography, here's a guy with a chip on his shoulder, very defensive. I think a big influence on him was his agency, the William Morris Agency, and his wife, who was much more right-wing than he was. I'm sure he justified it to himself in some way.

DW: What did you think of him personally?

WB: I was working for him at the time. I was writing a play for him. I thought he was wonderful. A very charismatic, enormously seductive man. And I thought he was just great. As a matter of fact, just a month before he testified I brought him down to meet some National Maritime Union guys who I had known, who were very left-wing. We spent an afternoon talking to them, drinking. And afterward, he told me, "Those are the people I believe in--that's the side I'm on," and a month later he testified.

DW: What did he say about politics in those days, before he testified?

WB: We never talked politics very much.

DW: You just assumed he was just generally left-wing?

WB: Yeah, generally, I never thought he was a Communist or anything like that. Generally, he was of the left. And *he* still thought so.

DW: What ever happened to the play you were writing?

WB: That was the end of that.

DW: Have you ever spoken to him since?

WB: No, no.

DW: Or had the desire to?

WB: No, never. As a matter of fact, a couple of months ago a friend of mine, who also became a friend of his, was with him and somehow my name came up. He was very friendly and sent me a copy of his book via this other fellow.

DW: In his autobiography, he says, "I am a person revealed to be interested only in what most artists are interested in, himself." Do you think that the best artists are only interested in themselves?

WB: No, of course not. The best artists are interested in the world as reflected obviously through themselves. That they have big egos, yes.

DW: Which is a different question.

WB: Exactly.

DW: Do you think it's a fair summation of his own outlook?

WB: Yes, I think probably it is.

DW: Do you think his films stand up?

WB: I always thought he was a better stage director than a film director.

DW: Is it possible to see his films without taking into account his behavior?

WB: It depends on the film. I can't see *On the Waterfront* as anything except an apology for his stoolpigeoning.

DW: I was reading Brando's autobiography, and he says that he had no idea that that was the theme or purpose of that film.

WB: I'm sure he didn't.

DW: He seems like an honest guy.

WB: I'm sure Marlon didn't. I'm not that crazy about Kazan's films. I liked *Streetcar* better as a stage play. *Zapata* was kind of a screwed up movie. He's gifted, I think he's a very gifted director. He was a very gifted

actor.

DW: Do you think his behavior manifested itself somehow in his later films?

WB: That's always hard to say. He became a writer. He wrote a number of not very good novels. I remember Marty Ritt saying that he started writing the kind of novels that he would have sneered at directing.

DW: The other question that arises is: why is the Academy doing this now?

WB: That's an interesting question, and I don't know the answer to it. I know that Karl Malden has been pushing for it for a long time. I think that there was a general feeling of: "Okay, enough already, he's old, he's not well." Then there's also the political climate, which I think is on the right today.

DW: Because it does seem there was a natural revulsion against what he did at the time. A rightward shift in certain layers has now produced a change.

WB: I think that's true. It's interesting because I'm going tomorrow to do a little television interview for the BBC on Kazan. And in talking to the guy on the phone about it, he said he's been surprised, among the people he's been talking to, that there is a feeling of acquiescence, that there aren't many people who are against it.

DW: Do you know if there's going to be any protest?

WB: Somebody told me, in fact, I was speaking to somebody in California yesterday, and they said there was going to be some kind of demonstration outside the award ceremony. I don't know how extensive it will be.



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