

Interview with an actor on the Elia Kazan controversy: "I think it was one of the darkest periods in our history"

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Victor Contreras is a film, television and stage actor, residing in the Los Angeles area, who appears in both English and Spanish-language productions. He is a former national and local board member of the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA). WSWS arts editor David Walsh interviewed Contreras recently on his attitude toward the lifetime achievement award bestowed on director Elia Kazan, renowned for his role as an informer during the anticommunist witch-hunts of the 1950s, at the March 21 Academy Awards ceremony.

David Walsh: What was your reaction to the Kazan award?

Victor Contreras: My reaction, regardless of the politics, comes from a humanitarian perspective. I feel his actions were wrong, regardless of what political position we are talking about. It was a basic humanistic betrayal of his friends, of his own. I think that to me is the sin, the predominant sin, more basic than the political sin. Throughout history, even if people have been in situations of great personal peril, we have condemned those who collaborated or turned in their own. What did we do to the French women that collaborated with the Nazis? We shaved their heads. So I think that the issue is even more basic than the politics.

Then if we look at him as an artist, being in the industry, I have to appraise his work more as a technician than as an artist, because as an artist he was lying. In one way or another, you're promoting certain values that as an informer you don't really have. It becomes something dishonest. Here you have somebody who has carried out a significant act through which he put other people in jeopardy to save himself; you have the values that he really acted on versus the

verbal values in his films. In my view everything is tainted.

DW: Are you familiar with the history of that period?

VC: Oh, yeah. I wouldn't say that I'm enormously knowledgeable about it, but I am aware of it. I think it was one of the darkest periods in our history, in the sense that it was so overt. Certainly, throughout history whoever has had the political power has influenced the media and the written word of the day. That's always been the case around the world. But this was such a blatant time of distortion, when we had just come out of a world conflict that had thrown the world into turmoil, and had been fought over such terrible human oppression--how could we turn around and sanction more oppression? Even though as it wasn't as violent or as ugly, it was still blatant oppression and coercion of artists. "You either play ball with us or you're going to go down" kind of pressure. In the same way, it is very difficult to accept, even at the risk of personal jeopardy, anybody turning on their own. And then stepping out afterward and trying to defend those actions, as Kazan did. I would have felt more comfortable if he had just ducked his head in shame.

I think that the good of this event, if we can look at it in that light, is that it brought the issues to a point of greater consciousness and discussion, because they are so divisive. I think there is great division in the industry, and if anything good came out of it, it was that it brought the controversy and issue forward, and made us very aware of all sides of the issue. For that reason, I see that as positive. Because otherwise it is really easily put on the back burner, forgotten, nobody pays any attention to it. And I think that if we forget we create fertile ground for it to happen again.

DW: People you knew in the industry were divided?

VC: Yeah, I really sensed that. And I think that in this particular award, this is the first time there has been this kind of division. I think this is the most lukewarm reception of a lifetime award recipient ever, and it's because of this divisiveness.

DW: Do you have any sense of what motivated those who remained seated, what their kind of feeling was? A gut reaction against somebody who was an informer?

VC: I think that that is probably the strongest feeling, and, second, those who have more leftist political opinions. And I think it's probably split pretty closely between those two camps. One is a criticism of him as a human being, as a fellow artist who betrayed his own, and the other view that would be more sympathetic to the left, because those holding it opposed the political oppression at the time.

DW: What do you think of the argument of those who said that this was not about politics, it was about art, and politics should be kept out of it?

VC: Within the entertainment community I think there are some people who truly hold that position. There are some who are sincere. But I also think there are some who have other motives, as was indicated by the sort of [right-wing] supporters Kazan had outside the ceremony. Even for those who stood on that issue cleanly, the situation was not clean. Even if they very sincerely felt that, the situation still wasn't clean.

DW: Do you think there is an extensive knowledge of the history of the blacklist and McCarthyism in the film industry?

VC: I think the veterans, people who have been around, they know. But I think that this is a hip industry, it's new, it's what's happening, it's a youth-driven thing, and, unfortunately, the youth--and I don't mean that necessarily just by age, but those young in the industry--aren't necessarily as well informed. And I think there is a whole new generation that needs to be awakened to this kind of stuff, and for that reason, I think that this was valuable because it created talk and discussion among a lot of people who weren't aware of what we were talking about. And that I think is its chief value.

DW: It has begun an important discussion. Do you see any signs of a slightly different political atmosphere, or a more questioning atmosphere?

VC: I hope so. And I say that with great trepidation. We, I think, have been suffering from a growing

atmosphere of apathy on so many questions, on so many fronts where people aren't really moved on issues. And I think that's really sad, but I think it's a reality. I'm hopeful that this kind of discussion will get a few people thinking and start some wheels churning. That apathy is fertile ground for all sorts of things to happen.

DW: I think the people organizing this thing were banking on that, and that they were very surprised by the amount of opposition they came up against. Has the enormous enrichment of certain people in the entertainment industry played a role in encouraging a stagnant atmosphere?

VC: Yeah, I think it's been cleverly managed in such a way that there are enough bones that are tossed to those who have none, so that they don't really rise up. I think it's very interesting if you look at the studios and how they operate. Instead of giving more roles to Native Americans, they'll throw them a banquet or honor American Indian Day, or hold a fundraiser for some African-American student group, or those kinds of things, rather than actually empower those groups or those people, or allow the outsiders to really get in. I think it's very consistent, the same situation continues. Those in stay in, those out stay out.



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