

# Blacklisted US film director Abraham Polonsky dead at 88

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Abraham Polonsky, the American screenwriter and director whose film career was destroyed by the anticommunist witch-hunts of the early 1950s, died at his home Tuesday in Beverly Hills. Polonsky would have been 89 on December 10.

Born in New York City in 1910, the son of immigrant parents, Polonsky gravitated naturally to left-wing views. In an interview in 1996 I asked him how he'd developed his ideas. "I was born into the Depression," Polonsky replied, "into the failure of [President Herbert] Hoover to do anything. My father was a socialist. The house was full of socialists. The attitude in our family was: if you're not smart enough to be a socialist, you're not smart enough to live."

After graduating from the City College of New York and Columbia Law School, Polonsky practiced law, taught and wrote radio scripts and novels, before signing a contract with Paramount.

Polonsky's impact on American films is felt most strongly in two works made in the late 1940s. He wrote the script for *Body and Soul* (directed by Robert Rossen, 1947), and apparently exercised a decisive influence over John Garfield's remarkable performance as a boxer prepared to do anything to get to the top. The following year Polonsky wrote and directed *Force of Evil*, in which Garfield plays a corrupt lawyer who faces a moral crisis over a Fourth of July weekend. Polonsky imparted to both works, through Garfield's performances, some of his own intelligence, energy, subversiveness and humor.

Critic Andrew Sarris observed in *The American Cinema, Directors and Direction, 1929-1968*, that "Polonsky, along with Chaplin and [Joseph] Losey, remains one of the great casualties of the anti-Communist hysteria of the fifties. *Force of Evil* stands up under repeated viewings as one of the great films of

the modern American cinema."

After refusing to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1951 Polonsky was blacklisted in Hollywood. During the 1950s, along with a number of other left-wing exiles from the film industry, he made a living in New York City in the television industry, using other writers' names. He also continued to write the occasional film script, including the crime drama *Odds Against Tomorrow* (directed by Robert Wise, 1959), for which he used the name John O. Killens. The Writers Guild of America restored Polonsky's name to the credits in 1996. After the lifting of the blacklist, he directed two lesser works, *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (1970), with Robert Redford, and *Romance of a Horsethief* (1971).

I spoke to Polonsky on two occasions. The first time was at the San Francisco film festival in 1996, where he was honored along with two other filmmakers, Paul Carpita of France and Paul Meyer of Belgium, who had faced political repression for their work. In February of this year I spoke to Polonsky on the telephone in regard to the controversy surrounding the decision by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to bestow an honorary Oscar on Elia Kazan.

In person Polonsky, a slight figure, exuded vigor and combativeness, even at the age of 85. He chose to come across as a kind of wise guy, always ready with somewhat cynical one-liners. At times the Groucho Marx routine wore a little thin, and one could feel, beneath [or through] the persona he adopted in public, some of the deep resentment and bitterness he must have felt. After all, he had been deprived of the ability to carry out his life's work by those who rule the US.

In 1996 I asked Polonsky, "What did the witch-hunt do, in your opinion, not merely to the film industry, but to the social atmosphere as a whole?" He told me: "It

made people afraid to have their own ideas. The blacklisting created self-censorship right throughout the community. Could you say something like that? Was that safe to think? It created that atmosphere and we're not over it yet. That's much worse than the damage it did to some of the blacklisted movie people.”

It's perfectly true that what was done to Polonsky and others does not rank as the greatest crime committed by the American political establishment, which has more than its share of villainy to account for, nonetheless it was a crime and it should be identified and remembered as such.



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