

54th Sydney Film Festival—Part 7

John Huston: a prolific filmmaker with some brilliant works

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This is the last in a series of articles on the 2007 Sydney Film Festival, held June 8-24. Part 1 appeared on July 4, Part 2 on July 10, Part 3 on July 11, Part 4 on July 12, Part 5 on July 24 and Part 6 on August 6.

John Huston directed 37 features during a nearly half-century career and this year's Sydney Film Festival presented a retrospective of this significant American filmmaker. Movies screened included: *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* (1948), *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950), *The African Queen* (1951), *The Misfits* (1961), *Fat City* (1972), *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean* (1972), *The Man Who Would Be King* (1975), *Wise Blood* (1979), *The Dead* (1987) and two war documentaries—*The Battle of San Pietro* (1945) and *Let There Be Light* (1946).

A local film critic ignorantly complained in one newspaper that the festival should not have wasted so much time on Huston because most of his movies were already available on DVD or cable.

This flippant comment underestimates the value of Huston's best work, which was obviously made for the cinema and whose artistic power needs to be appreciated on the big screen. It also reflects the extent to which the American director fell out of favour with a number of film academics and critics during the 1960s because he did not easily fit into the auteur category—the definition applied to directors with clearly identifiable filmmaking styles or techniques. He was considered something of a chameleon, or worse, an opportunist without a style of his own.

In fact, Huston always insisted that he was only interested in accurately reflecting the style and mood of the stories from which his movies were adapted. A lover of great literature and art, Huston drew from a range of writers for inspiration, including Rudyard Kipling, Herman Melville, Stephen Crane, James Joyce, C. S. Forster, Tennessee Williams and Malcolm Lowry. He often remarked that his true artistic love was painting and writing and regarded filmmaking as an extension of these forms.

Early influences and career

John Huston was born in 1906 in a small town in Missouri called Nevada where, according to family legend, his professional gambler grandfather won the local electricity, water and gas utility company in a poker game. The young boy had an extraordinary early life and one steeped in art, literature, drama and a range of other cultural influences.

His father, Walter Huston, was a vaudeville performer who later became a great stage and movie actor, famously starring in a number of his son's best movies. Rhea Gore Huston, John Huston's mother, was a talented sports writer with a life-long interest in horses, gambling and travel, which

she passed on to her son.

Rhea and Walter separated when John was three years old. While he lived with his mother in Texas and then California, Huston also spent time with his father. Huston, who had to overcome serious health problems as a boy, went on to become a light-weight boxer in California, an honorary officer in the Mexican cavalry, a journalist in New York and a street artist in Paris.

With the help of his father, he broke into the movie business in 1930, first at Samuel Goldwyn, then at Universal. In the mid-thirties, he spent time drifting around London, Paris and Chicago, unsure of whether he wanted to be a painter or a writer.

Huston returned to Los Angeles in 1937 and began working for Warner Brothers, writing screenplays for the company's key directors—*Jezebel* for Anatole Litvak, *The Amazing Dr. Clitterhouse* and *Juarez* for William Dieterle, and in 1941 *High Sierra* for Raoul Walsh and *Sergeant York* for Howard Hawks.

The 35-year-old was given his first opportunity to direct in 1941 with *The Maltese Falcon*, Dashiell Hammett's classic crime thriller. Hollywood had twice filmed the book—in 1931 and 1936—but Huston's movie established a new framework for the detective genre.

Its central figure, Sam Spade, runs a two-man private detective agency. His partner is murdered and Spade becomes involved with a gang of criminals plotting to get an ancient and priceless statue—the Maltese Falcon. A statue is eventually obtained but it is a fake.

Under Huston's self-assured direction, Hammett's hard-boiled dialogue is delivered with machine-gun rapidity as each layer of the tale of intrigue and deception is peeled away. There is some remarkable wry humour and Spade (Humphrey Bogart), forever the archetypal private eye, treats the police with contempt, almost unthinkable in contemporary American film and television.

Not a single word or image is wasted in the superbly photographed movie, which was released in October 1941, against the background of the Nazi occupation of Europe and a few short months before the US entered World War II.

The Maltese Falcon was a box office hit, established Bogart as a star, and Huston's screenplay received an Oscar nomination. Its exploration of crime and corruption, personal integrity, heroism and honour no doubt resonated with American audiences on the eve of war.

Huston joined the Army Signal Corps in 1942 and made three documentaries—*Report from the Aleutians* (1943), *The Battle of San Pietro* (1945) and *Let There Be Light* (1946). The last two, which were screened at the film festival, have an interesting history and point to issues the director would explore in later work.

Narrated by Huston, *The Battle of San Pietro* documents a nine-day struggle against Nazi troops for control of the strategic Italian village

south of Monte Cassino in December 1943. The director's courageous frontline work set new standards, but the film was cut almost in half by the US military. It regarded the movie's unflinching exposure of the American death toll as "antiwar."

Huston responded by declaring that if he ever made a pro-war film, he should be shot. The 33-minute film was eventually released in 1945, but only after sections of the US military decided it could be used for training soldiers who had never faced combat.

Let There Be Light had an even more chequered history. The director was commissioned to document the treatment of traumatised American soldiers, as part of the government's efforts to assist returning veterans reintegrate into post-war society. The men, who are shown being treated at a Long Island hospital, are profoundly scarred by their war experiences and suffer variously from stuttering, amnesia, hysterical paralysis and acute melancholia.

Let There Be Light is a somewhat over-optimistic work and the medical treatment is obviously dated. It nonetheless gives audiences a glimpse of the severe psychological damage incurred by American soldiers in the war. The US army was hostile to the film, claiming that it would discourage people from joining the military and refused to allow its release until the early 1980s.

Classic period

Resuming his Hollywood career, Huston made *The Treasure of Sierra Madre*, *Key Largo* and *The Asphalt Jungle* between 1947 and 1950. Arguably his best work, these movies reflect deeply-felt popular concerns about the direction of life in the US and were produced as America's ruling elite unleashed its anti-communist witch-hunt in Hollywood and the trade unions.

Huston was outraged by the government Red-baiting, and like many filmmakers, artists and writers at this time, was animated by a feeling that society's problems were rooted in the greed and corruption of the people at the top.

His *The Treasure of Sierra Madre* gives voice to some of these conceptions and is a remarkable exploration of how fabulous wealth can poison personal relations and bring misfortune. Adapted from B. Traven's 1927 novel of the same name, Huston closely collaborated with the reclusive author, an anarcho-socialist who had participated in 1919 German Revolution, throughout the production.

Two down-at-heel Americans in Mexico—Fred C. Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart) and Bob Curtin (Tim Holt)—decide to team up with Howard (Walter Huston), an old and experienced prospector, to search for gold in the Sierra Madre. The group eventually strikes it rich but their plans come unstuck—Dobbs goes mad and dies and the gold dust is scattered by the desert winds.

This is perhaps Huston's most perfectly executed film, with excellent performances and some unforgettable dialogue. Walter Huston, who won an Oscar for his role as the gritty prospector, for example, explains why gold is worth so much: "An ounce of gold, mister, is worth what it is because of the human labor that went into the findin' and the gettin' of it ... There's no other explanation. Gold itself ain't good for nothing except making jewelry with and gold teeth."

Key Largo, Huston's next film, is about a WWII veteran, Frank McCloud (Humphrey Bogart), who is disillusioned because America is still plagued with unemployment, poverty and corruption. He clashes with some gangsters led by John Rocco (Edward G. Robinson) who are on the run and holding up in a Florida hotel operated by his dead army partner's wife and her father-in-law.

Rocco boasts that he can buy any Florida politician: "I make them out of whole cloth, just like a tailor makes a suit. I get their name in the newspaper. I get them some publicity and I get their name on the ballot. Then, after the election, we count the votes, and if they don't turn out right, we recount them again until they do."

Anti-communist hysteria

The Treasure of Sierra Madre and *Key Largo* were produced in 1947, the year that the House on Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) began witch-hunting filmmakers over alleged communist infiltration of Hollywood.

The socialist-minded Huston joined with director William Wyler and scriptwriter Philip Dunne to establish the Committee for the Defence of the First Amendment and won the support of Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Gene Kelly, Danny Kaye, Sterling Hayden and others who travelled to Washington in October 1947 to protest the HUAC hearings. The lobby group, however, was short lived. Accused by the government and media of supporting of communism, Bogart and others said they had been dragooned into the group and withdrew support.

In late November 1947, American film producers passed a resolution stating that they would not knowingly employ communists. Members of the "Hollywood Ten"—a group of openly left-wing writers and directors—were eventually charged with contempt for refusing to answer some of HUAC's questions and prosecuted, many serving one-year jail terms.

Over the next ten years, more than 300 artists—including directors, radio commentators, actors and screenwriters—were blacklisted. Figures such as Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, Huston and others found it impossible to work in the US under these conditions and left the country in disgust.

"The McCarthy years weren't just a matter of censorship," Huston recalled in 1979. "Suddenly people were made into circus performers. If they didn't jump through hoops, they were disgraced, ruined, and destroyed."

Huston went on to make *We Were Strangers* in 1949, starring Jennifer Jones and John Garfield, who was being hounded by the HUAC at this time. Set in 1933, the movie is about a group of revolutionaries trying to overthrow a fascist dictatorship in Cuba and was a fairly obvious comment on political relations in the US. This is not a great film, and not all that well known. It is however, quite interesting and opens with a quote from Thomas Jefferson: "Resistance to tyrants is obedience to God."

The *Hollywood Reporter* denounced the film as a "shameful handbook of Marxian dialectics ... and the heaviest dish of Red theory ever served to an audience outside the Soviet Union." Columbia withdrew the movie from theatres two weeks after its release.

Huston's next film, *The Asphalt Jungle*, about a multi-million dollar jewelry heist, is an impressive work and has a bitter, subversive tone. It stars Sam Jaffe, Sterling Hayden and Marilyn Monroe in her first important movie role. Shot in black and white, the movie effectively captures the dark and seedy urban underworld—an image entirely at odds with the sort of American Dream falsehoods that the powers-that-be were disseminating at this time.

Huston followed this with *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), Stephen Crane's intense story about a young Union soldier's baptism of fire in the American Civil War. There were countless conflicts between Huston and MGM, which eventually slashed 20 minutes from the movie, eliminating some its most powerful battle scenes. Many regarded the movie, even in its truncated form, as one of Huston's most significant works.

Huston left the US to begin working on his much celebrated *The African*

Queen, the romantic adventure starring Katherine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart set in Africa during the early days of World War I. While the film was a popular and critical success, he was increasingly angered with the political situation in the US and in 1952 took up residence in Ireland, becoming an Irish citizen in 1964.

"I left the country," he later explained, "because I could not abide with what McCarthy was doing to America ... [and] I did not want to come back into an atmosphere that was permeated with the stench of that dreadful man. In some ways, I trace the Nixon years with its disgrace to the McCarthy period."

McCarthyism and the anti-communist witch-hunting left a deep impression on Huston and one that he often referred to in the following years.

Like many of his contemporaries, however, Huston drew pessimistic conclusions from this experience. "The idea of America, the America of our founding fathers, was lost," he later recalled. "It stopped being that America and became something else. And then one wondered whether it ever had been America except for the founding fathers and a few rare souls. Was it all an illusion?"

Difficult years

Huston's next period of work—from 1952 until 1971—was not entirely fruitful and reflected a general decline, especially after 1960, of Hollywood filmmaking. While he continued working throughout, averaging one film a year, the results were patchy.

Some movies, such as *Moulin Rouge* (1952), about French painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec; *The Night of the Iguana* (1964) about an alcoholic and defrocked preacher (Richard Burton) eking out an existence as a local tour guide in Mexico, are committed and intelligent works. *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, about homosexuality and sexual repression set on an isolated military base in America's Deep South and starring Marlon Brando and Elizabeth Taylor, also has some compelling moments.

Other Huston films made during this period were ambitious but artistic failures—*Moby Dick* (1956); *The Misfits* (1961), starring Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable in their last roles; and *Freud* (1962), for example. Others, such as *The Barbarian and the Geisha* (1958), *The Bible: In the Beginning...* (1966), *Sinful Davey* (1969), are best forgotten.

Huston also made appearances in many films and was nominated for a best supporting actor Oscar in Otto Preminger's *The Cardinal* (1963). While he claimed that he never took acting seriously and only did it for the money, his performance as the corrupt and malevolent Noah Cross in Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974) was exceptional.

Huston continued to experiment with various cinematic techniques throughout his career while arguing that he had no definable style. As he told one journalist in 1973: "Pointing a camera at a certain reality means an interpretation of that reality. But I don't seek to interpret reality by placing my stamp on it. I try to be as faithful as I can to the material I have chosen to film. Everything technical and artistic in the picture is designed to depict that material for an audience. That, in the end is what matters."

Nor did Huston make a fetish out of technique or attempt to impress audiences with dazzling cinematography: "If a [camera] shot is well-conceived, and moves as it should, it develops like a ballet with the camera. No one is allowed to become aware of it. Your mind is what is moving and looks at the idea, not the shot."

The final years

Huston worked right up until his death in 1987 and, despite chronic emphysema and failing health, produced several outstanding movies.

Fat City (1972), for example, which is often neglected by critics, was a wonderful return to form and the first film Huston had shot in America for over a decade. Adapted from a Leonard Gardner novel, it stars Stacey Keach, an alcoholic boxer trying to make a comeback, and Jeff Bridges, a young up-and-coming fighter.

Huston brought to bear his early experiences in the ring to create an honest and deeply humane portrayal of those on the bottom rungs of boxing's food chain. Whether Huston was inspired by political developments in the US, the anti-Vietnam war movement and the emergence of more socially-critical films by a number of American directors, is not entirely clear, but *Fat City* is an inspired work.

Three years later Huston fulfilled a life-long ambition to direct an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's *The Man Who Would Be King*, an adventure story starring Sean Connery and Michael Caine as two former British soldiers who aim to take control of Kafiristan, a remote and dangerous kingdom in the Hindukush, and steal its wealth. Like many other Huston movies, their plans come to a tragic end, undone by greed and/or illusions of grandeur.

Wise Blood (1979), a black comedy set in America's Deep South, is another praiseworthy work. The movie is about a confused and psychologically scarred young US soldier returning to his small hometown who decides to establish his own religion—the Church of Truth without Christ. Unfortunately *Wise Blood* is rarely screened and still not available on DVD.

Under the Volcano (1984), set in Mexico and based on Malcolm Lowry's novel about a drunk and suicidal diplomat, and *Prizzi's Honor* (1985), a comedy about the Mafia and starring Jack Nicholson, Kathleen Turner and Huston's daughter Anjelica, are interesting and generally skilled efforts.

The Dead, Huston's last film and completed just before he passed away on August 28, 1987, is a beautiful adaptation of James Joyce's short story of the same name. Joyce's beguiling tale is considered by many as the best short story in the English language.

Huston's movie, which stars Anjelica Huston with Donal McCann and a stellar cast of Irish actors, is deceptively simple but expertly captures the emotional complexity of Joyce's characters. It is one of the director's finest films and a distinguished end to his long and varied career.

Huston was a complex and larger-than-life filmmaker who was trained in the best traditions of the Hollywood studio system, including its often radical content, and witnessed its intellectual decay and collapse. Many of his movies have a sour tone and suggest that humanity is doomed to fail in its various projects.

Critic Andrew Sarris called Huston less a pessimist "than a defeatist", and asserted that the director's "best film, *The Asphalt Jungle*, deals fittingly with collective defeat." His films do often deal with defeat or even collective defeat, through greed or corruption or simple lack of cooperation, but was that not a response, conscious or otherwise, to some of the real difficulties of the century, the defeat of some *very major* collective efforts (the Soviet Union, the American labour movement)? Of course Huston did not understand the source of the defeats, but that is another matter.

His sourness in later years was no doubt conditioned as well by his anger and disappointment over the collapse of organised opposition to the anti-communist hysteria unleashed against left-wing filmmakers, artists and intellectuals in post-WWII America. Huston was deeply affected by these events but never really attempted to understand the driving forces behind them.

Huston's great strength as a filmmaker, however, was his life-long determination to translate great literature and art into cinematic form. This approach, combined with his genuine empathy for ordinary people and a

healthy disdain for authority, are powerfully reflected in his best work. “[W]hat matters,” he once commented, “is not a new method, but the return to the sources of life, of people and of society ...”



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