

Letters on art and culture

7 April 2008

The following is a selection of letters sent to the World Socialist Web Site on art and culture.

On "Jules Dassin: victim of the anti-communist witch-hunt, dies at 96"

David,

I am astounded by the breadth and depth of your commentary on Jules Dassin and his work. I've never seen any of his films and know little of the history of film or theater, but I have rarely seen anything in critical reviews that treats its subject with such detail, understanding and clarity. Thank you for helping us understand a little more about film and politics in America.

Sincerely yours,

RD

San Diego California, USA

3 April 2008

About five years ago, my wife attended a showing of Jules Dassin's film, *He Who Must Die*, at the Bing Theatre, which forms part of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The special guest that night was none other than Dassin himself, who was to speak after a showing of the film. The theatre was packed.

I believe that by that time, Mr. Dassin was past being an octogenarian, but he took command of that stage with a sharpness and a wit that belied his years. He held the audience in thrall, and at the end, the audience rose to its feet to give him a standing ovation, not so much in veneration of an artist who had created a rather interesting body of work, but as one who never buckled under McCarthy's witch-hunt and never, never turned in any names.

I had a chance to speak a few words with him amid the throng surrounding him. When I told him I was a socialist, he winked his left eye at me and said, "Don't ever give up. Keep up the good fight." Then he shook my hand warmly and hugged me, a total stranger. All I knew at that moment is that there was still some fight in him. And with that, he kept going and out of the theatre he went.

The irony of it all is that his film that night was the already-mentioned *He Who Must Die*, not one of his best, but neither a lamentable effort as Mr. Walsh indicates. It was about the fight for liberation in a small town where a band of townspeople, in enacting the life of Jesus and his disciples,

become out and out revolutionaries against the occupying forces. Yes, it was heavy handed, but it was full of energy and humor, chutzpah and tragedy, and a paean to the human spirit. It was a breadth of fresh air in a town that was getting ready to crown Elia Kazan for his life achievements.

RR

Los Angeles, California, USA

6 April 2008

This is again one of the WSWS's most touching obituaries celebrating the passing of talents often overshadowed in this most dismal era. Together with this issue's obituary of Paul Scofield, it again reveals how much we have to learn from the past and how much has been deliberately suppressed at a time celebrating conformist mediocrity, artists switching their political allegiances at the most opportunistic moment to make money and remain in the establishment no matter how much they may deny it (Mamet).

The obituary also mentions the passing of Richard Widmark, an actor whom Dave Kehr has positively written about in the *New York Times* and who has received many touching comments in Kehr's blog page. Since one of Dassin's major achievements was the British film noir *Night and the City*, it may be relevant to cite one blog entry concerning Widmark taking the Russian director Tarkovsky to task for his blanket condemnation of American cinema during a joint film festival appearance. Both men returned to their destinations on the same plane, and Tarkovsky refused to acknowledge Widmark's presence.

Despite the bland distinctions often made between art and commercial cinema, it is obvious who was the real human being in this case. Widmark, Dassin and Scofield would never have appeared in the last film of a supposedly humanist director who set a horse on fire for one gratuitous scene. These three men will be sadly missed, but we will remember their names with pride (I'm citing the title of one of Scofield's lesser films, the bio-pic of WWOO heroine Violette Szabo, *Carve Her Name with Pride*). Thanks again for writing such a touching and very relevant obituary.

TW

3 April 2008

On "Actor Paul Scofield (January 21, 1922-March 19, 2008): 'I'm an actor because I'm good at it'"

Thank you so much for this sensitive reminiscence of one of my favourite actors. I have a number of long-playing records of Paul Scofield's Shakespearean and other performances, and though I haven't owned a record player for years, I won't discard them. One hopes that more actors today follow his example of integrity and seriousness about the value of his craft. I recall that he was also a vocal opponent of the Vietnam War. Thanks for another superior arts article from the WSWS.

KV

North Vancouver, Canada

4 April 2008

On "New York's premier library to be renamed for billionaire Wall Street speculator"

I enjoyed Peter Daniels's article about Wall Street investor Stephen A. Schwarzman's donation to the New York Public Library. It fills the need to talk concretely about cultural problems and the twisted "morals" they engender in the US. I liked his references to the recent period as the "new Gilded Age."

Because of the shortfall in Wall Street tax revenue for New York City, the city's public libraries are faced with budget cuts that will affect staffing, hours and the development of holdings and electronic resources.

It is also significant that at cultural institutions in the city there is a huge inequality in salaries. The wages of ordinary librarians and museum workers remain low, stagnant and appropriate for a standard of living decades past, while the directors of these institutions are paid—and live and think—like the magnates on Wall Street.

A librarian at the Research and Humanities Library can start at about \$33,000 a year. He or she would have to have an advanced degree in Library Science in addition to a bachelors degree, meaning that it is more than likely that he or she has accumulated thousands of dollars of debt to pay for a highly specialized education.

Paul LeClerc, president and chief executive of the New York Public Library, on the other hand, earned \$800,000 in 2006, which, as the *New York Times* has observed, is an increase of over \$220,000 from the previous year.

This is in keeping with compensation for executives of other non-profit cultural institutes in the city. Philippe de Montebello, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art earned \$4.7 million in 2006, which included a one-time payment of \$3 million for his thirtieth anniversary as director.

Glenn Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art, was compensated to the tune of \$1.5 million in 2005 by the museum. "Yet," as the *New York Times* reported last year, "for more than eight years, his income was even higher than the museum reported in its tax forms, thanks to a trust

created by two of the museum's wealthiest trustees ... who donated a Bonnard painting valued at \$800,000 that was later sold. The trust used the money to make payments to Mr. Lowry."

Thomas Krens, who stepped down as director of the Guggenheim Museum last month, earned \$634,000 in 2004. It is likely that his current salary is higher and that he will receive a lump sum in severance pay. He recently sold his downtown Manhattan loft for \$5.5 million.

Krens will now direct the establishment of a Guggenheim branch in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. Last year, Human Rights Watch wrote to Krens expressing concerns that construction of the Guggenheim would exploit workers in that country, mostly immigrant workers. It urged Krens and the Guggenheim not to confiscate workers' passports or to withhold wages, as is the usual practice in the United Arab Emirates.

Apologists for this sort of compensation argue that such "cultural leaders" must be able move among potential donors. Catherine C. Maroon, chairwoman of the New York Public Library, in a letter in response to a *New York Times* article on LeClerc's salary, claimed, "Competitive compensation is necessary to attract and keep the best people."

She perhaps said more than she meant. The super-rich have doubled their share of the national income since the 1970s. Although they are exploiters and social parasites, they think that power and wealth makes them "the best people," better than the masses below them.

A layer of highly paid upper-middle-class cultural functionaries has arisen to cater to their needs of this elite. They are paid to act and think like the top 1 percent of income earners. Inevitably, they absorb the stink of oligarchy.

Cultural life is in danger when a tiny number of Schwarzmans control not only the finances of cultural institutions, but also co-opt the top managers of these institutions themselves.

Sandy English

31 March 2008



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