

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

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3 April 2008

Film director Jules Dassin, who was blacklisted in Hollywood in the early 1950s and spent the rest of his life in Europe, died in Athens March 31 at the age of 96.

Dassin is best known for a number of *film noirs* he directed from 1947-1950 for Hollywood studios (*Brute Force*, *The Naked City*, *Thieves' Highway* and *Night and the City*), *Rififi* (1955)—a heist film made while in exile in France—and several films that starred Melina Mercouri (eventually his wife), including *Never on Sunday* (1960) and *Topkapi* (1964).

Dassin was one of the last surviving directors who did major work in the immediate postwar period. Ironically, Richard Widmark, the star of one of his finest works, *Night and the City*, and one of the last remaining male stars who emerged in that same period, died only a week earlier.

Dassin may have been “a lively director in a minor key,” as critic Andrew Sarris once described him, but such terms are relative. A brief look at his life and career serves as a reminder that Dassin and others of his generation in Hollywood, whatever their limitations, were people of some substance. They had known hardship and struggle, they lived through enormous historical events and these varying experiences left important traces in their artistic efforts. One only has to compare them with the vast majority of contemporary filmmakers!

That the American establishment and film industry, with the eager complicity of producers, guilds and media, was permitted to prevent these left-wing writers, directors and actors from working or drive them from the country is a national disgrace that continues to have consequences.

Dassin was one of eight children born in Middletown, Connecticut, to a Russian-Jewish immigrant family originally from Odessa; the family soon moved to Harlem in New York City. His father was a barber. Jules (born Julius) attended school in the Bronx. To become a socialist or communist was an entirely natural and almost organic development for someone of his generation. As he told the *Guardian* in an interview in 2002, “You grow up in Harlem where there’s trouble getting fed and keeping families warm, and live very close to Fifth Avenue, which is elegant. You fret, you get ideas, seeing a lot of poverty around you, and it’s a very natural process.”

Left-wing artistic circles abounded in New York during the Depression. Dassin gravitated toward the left-wing Yiddish theater company, ARTEF (*Arbeter Theatre Farband*, or Workers Theatre Organization), directed by one his first mentors, Benno Schneider.

According to Brian Neve in *Film and Politics in America*, ARTEF was “founded in 1925 as an agitprop theatre, reflecting the Soviet practice of the time. The style of the theatre has been described as eclectic, reflecting the influence of Vakhtangov, but also of ‘a touch of Brecht, agitprop, and undistilled Stanislavsky.’” Dassin first acted, but soon began directing for the company, with which he remained for six years. At some point he joined the Communist Party. He later asserted he left the Stalinist party at the time of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939.

Dassin began writing for radio as well. After ARTEF dissolved in 1939, he directed a play on Broadway that led to an offer from RKO, one of the

major studios. He was brought to Hollywood as an “observer,” someone “who watches other people make films,” as Dassin once told interviewer Sandra Berg, presumably as an apprenticeship.

One of those he watched film was Alfred Hitchcock, during the shooting of *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (1941), apparently not an entirely happy experience for Dassin. Rejected by the army for physical reasons and fired from RKO, Dassin went to work for MGM, suffering through what he called a “seven-year slave contract.” He directed a number of unmemorable ‘B’ pictures there. His chafing at the situation became known to Louis B. Mayer, head of the studio, who summoned him to a meeting. A verbal battle erupted that ended when Mayer screamed at him, “Get out of here, you dirty Red!” Needless to say, his contract with MGM also came to an end.

Dassin’s career in films really began when he hooked up with independent producer Mark Hellinger, who had produced *The Killers* (directed by Robert Siodmak), a memorable film based on a Hemingway story, in 1946. Dassin made two social realist films for Hellinger, *Brute Force* (1947) and *The Naked City* (1948).

The former, Dassin’s first dramatic effort, is an enormously *forceful* work; Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times*, while disapproving of the film’s theme, called the direction “steel-sprung.” Burt Lancaster plays the leader of a group of convicts who suffer under (and ultimately revolt against) the sadism of a chief guard, played memorably by Hume Cronyn. The film is crude and angry, and its vision of the prisoners perhaps overly simplistic, but its sympathy for the underdog and hostility to authority is palpable. Like many of the most interesting films of the time, it throbs with a hatred of fascism and the fascist personality. Lancaster is especially vital and explosive.

Neve in *Film and Politics in America* notes that commentator Thom Andersen places Dassin among a group of younger, left-wing directors (including Joseph Losey, Abe Polonsky, Robert Rossen and John Berry) whose work was “characterized by ‘greater psychological and social realism,’ by a scepticism about the American dream and by pointed reference to the ‘psychological injuries of class.’”

Dassin then directed *The Naked City* (which eventually generated a popular television series in the 1950s), about a police manhunt, on location in New York City in near documentary style. Dassin’s influences may have been as eclectic as the ARTEF’s repertoire. Sarris asserts that German director Fritz Lang’s “stylistic influence ... helped spawn a new generation of film noir directors” including Dassin. Italian neo-realism, with its emphasis on naturalism, non-professionalism and location filming, was certainly another influence. One of Dassin’s most well-known works, *The Naked City* is not necessarily one of his best. The director, in any case, asserts that Universal re-cut the film, and that his “humanist” vision and emphasis on class differences had been “ripped out of the film.”

Thieves' Highway is also an interesting work. Richard Conte, a fine actor, plays a trucker out for revenge against the mob controlling the San

Francisco produce market. Lee J. Cobb (a future informer) is the chief thug. Dassin complained, "I only had 24 days to shoot—I could have done it better with more time."

By this time the Hollywood witch-hunters were closing in. What happened next to Dassin seems almost too melodramatic to be true. According to Sandra Berg's article/interview: "'Everyone heard that subpoenas were being handed out,' says actor-producer Norman Lloyd, remembering one fateful night in 1949. 'Dassin lived on Bronson, and there was a knock on Jules' front door. Julie answered to find Darryl Zanuck [head of 20th Century Fox], who said, 'You better get out of town.' He gave him the assignment to direct *Night and the City* in London. It was unheard of to have a studio executive come in person like that and try to help.'

"Dassin has never forgotten that experience: 'Zanuck said, 'You're going to England. Get a fucking script done, begin shooting, start with the most expensive scenes and they won't fire you, because it's probably going to be the last picture you're ever going to make.'" I liked Darryl Zanuck! While I was working on the script, Zanuck called me and said, "I want you to write in a part for Gene Tierney. She's going through hell, and she's a good kid. Save her." So I wrote her a part. She was at the end of her career. This was a side to Zanuck that people didn't know."

Night and the City bears the impression of the tension and trauma of the period. Widmark plays an American lowlife, Harry Fabian, who gets in over his head attempting to promote wrestling. He comes up against the mob and pays for it. The most memorable scenes involve Widmark's desperate efforts to stay ahead of his killers.

Neve writes: "The climax involves a chase through a Dickensian underworld as gang leaders offer £1,000 to anyone who can deliver Fabian. The police are notable by their absence, or ineffectuality, and everyone has their price. ... A hunted animal near to death, Fabian confides in an old woman, 'I was so close to being on the top, Hanna, so close.'" This was Dassin's last US-financed film before the blacklist made him "unemployable."

Dassin returned to the US and was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee, although he was never called to testify. Nonetheless, after being named by others, including Elia Kazan and former Hollywood Ten member Edward Dmytryk (whose children Dassin had once looked after), the filmmaker knew his career in Hollywood was finished. He moved to France, where he found no work for five years.

His next project turned out to be *Rififi*, a crime thriller filmed in Paris. Dassin adapted it from a book that he hadn't much liked. He wrote a screenplay with a collaborator in seven days. One of its most famous sequences is a 33-minute scene without music or dialogue, the scene of the crime itself. The scene is much praised for its unremitting tension, but Dassin points out that one of the chief reasons for the lack of dialogue was his unfamiliarity with the French language and his desire to produce as short a script as possible.

Critics are divided over the work. François Truffaut apparently considered it one of the greatest crime dramas ever made, at least at the time. Sarris regarded it as overrated, and Jean-Luc Godard, then a critic, commented superciliously in 1959: "Jules Dassin wasn't at all bad when he was shooting semi-documentary style among Italian fruit-workers of San Francisco, in the old wooden subway of New York, on the dreamy docks of that charming city which, as Sacha Guitry said, the English insist on calling London. But one day, alas, our Jules began to take himself seriously and came to France with a martyr's passport. At the time, *Rififi* fooled some people. Today, it can't hold a candle to [Jacques Becker's 1954] *Touchez pas au Grisbi*, which paved the way for it, let alone [Jean-Pierre Melville's 1956] *Bob le Flambeur*, which it paved the way for."

Be that as it may, *Rififi* is a competently and intelligently made and acted film, with Dassin playing one of the criminals. Berg notes, "While writing the screenplay, his [Dassin's] experiences of the hard times he

and many of his colleagues were living through had a profound influence on the script. 'I was thinking when I was writing about my character's death,' he says. 'There's a close shot of me saying, "You've got to shoot me," and I was thinking so much of the guys who were blacklisted. [In the scene] they want [Dassin's character] to give names to the gangster that's going to kill me and I was thinking, No, you don't give names. I was thinking of all my friends who during the McCarthy era betrayed other friends.'"

Dassin became romantically and artistically involved with Greek actor Melina Mercouri in the mid-1950s. Some of their films together are forgettable, or worse (*He Who Must Die* [based on a Nikos Kazantzakis novel], *The Law, Phaedra*). *Never on Sunday* (1960), with Mercouri as a lighthearted prostitute, is something of a fantasy and a trifle, but it helped open the American cinema up to a more realistic, or at least less prudish, attitude toward sexual matters. It's not coincidental that the cheerful work came out at the same time as the end of the blacklist. *Topkapi* (1964), another heist film (with Mercouri and Peter Ustinov), but this time in a comic vein, is also a slight work, but it too helped loosen up American audiences and introduced them to a more knowing, cynical European attitude toward cops and robbers.

There is not much after this to Dassin's film career. But before he retired entirely from filmmaking in 1980, politics and reaction were once again to disrupt his artistic activity in the form of the Greek military junta. After the latter came to power in 1967, Dassin and Mercouri went into exile, to Paris, and publicly campaigned against the dictatorship. After its downfall, the couple returned, and Mercouri wound up as culture minister in the left-bourgeois PASOK government of Andreas Papandreu in 1981. Mercouri died in 1994. Dassin lived out the rest of his days in Greece, occasionally directing in the theater.

Dassin's life was bound up with critical events in the 20th century. He became a victim, along with many other talented figures, of the anti-communist frenzy of the 1950s, a frenzy that crippled artistic and intellectual life in the US for decades. The film industry still suffers from the purge of left-wing and critical spirits.

What kind of work he and others of his generation might have produced under more favorable circumstances is obviously an unanswerable question. No one seems to have doubted his sincerity or honesty.

Bertrand Tavernier, French filmmaker and film writer, observed: "McCarthyism, in reducing to silence a whole generation of young filmmakers (Dassin, Losey, Berry, Rossen, Polonsky, Enfield), important screenwriters (Trumbo, Wilson, Maltz, Buchman, Ring Lardner Jr., Hugo Butler), paralyzed an entire creative impulse."



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