American filmmaker Sydney Pollack (1934-2008)

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American director, producer and actor Sydney Pollack, best known for *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969), *The Way We Were* (1973), *Three Days of the Condor* (1973), *Tootsie* (1982) and *Out of Africa* (1985), died May 26 in Pacific Palisades, California of cancer at the age of 73. He had been more active—and perhaps more successful—in recent years as a producer (*The Quiet American, Michael Clayton, Recount*) and actor in film and television than a director.

As the list of his own films would indicate, Pollack was responsible for intelligent commercial fare, which never lacked moments of insight, but rarely if ever reached inspired heights.

Born to Russian-Jewish parents in Lafayette, Indiana (home of Purdue University, attended by his mother and father) in 1934 and raised in South Bend, Indiana, Pollack moved to New York City in the early 1950s to pursue an acting career. He studied for two years at the Neighborhood Playhouse under Sanford Meisner, who taught a variant of Konstantin Stanislavski's theories on realism in performance. Meisner was a critical influence on Pollack.

In New York theater in the early 1950s Pollack would have entered a generally left-wing artistic world that was reeling or retreating from the anticommunist witch-hunting. Later, as an actor in television in the mid-1950s, he would have encountered numerous writers who were in exile from the Hollywood blacklist. Pollack treated this period, rather superficially, in *The Way We Were*.

After serving in the military, through director John Frankenheimer and actor Burt Lancaster, Pollack was hired by Universal Studios executive Lew Wasserman in 1960 to spend six months learning his way around a film and television studio. He continued to act during this apprenticeship, making his television directing debut in 1961. Over the next few years he directed dozens of episodes of well-known television series. Also through his connection to Lancaster, Pollack became the supervisor of the English-language dubbing of Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard*.

He directed his first feature film, *The Slender Thread*, with Anne Bancroft and Sidney Poitier, in 1965. A distraught woman (Bancroft) takes a number of barbiturates in a suicide attempt and then calls a crisis clinic. Poitier, as a volunteer at the crisis center, keeps her on the line for an hour while emergency personnel try to locate her.

Over the next 40 years Pollack directed 19 more feature films, all of them with major film stars. He worked on seven films with Robert Redford, on whose Sundance Institute board of directors Pollack served for years, and two with Lancaster, Jane Fonda and Harrison Ford. He also directed Natalie Wood, Faye Dunaway, Sally Field, Jessica Lange and Nicole Kidman, along with Robert Mitchum, Al Pacino, Paul Newman, Dustin Hoffman and Tom Cruise. Pollack once boasted that he had never made an "art film" in his career; he made clear his desire to attract and please a mass audience.

Hollywood's great strength during its heyday was to offer relatively complex works to a mass audience. By Pollack's time, however, both the American film industry and the audience had changed.

Pollack, in many ways, represents a middle ground or transition point, not necessarily a happy one, between generations, vocations and artistic approaches.

In a favorable light, he can be viewed as a multitalented figure (director, actor and producer; also someone capable of wielding a camera and other film equipment; a fine jazz pianist) whose career spanned—and survived—a number of different stages in the history of the film industry, from the end of the studio system in the 1960s, the American "new wave" of independent filmmaking in the 1970s, the "blockbuster" phase of the 1980s and 1990s, and even the beginnings of a revival of socially critical filmmaking in the first decade of the 21st century. And he survived these vicissitudes with a certain degree of dignity and grace.

Less charitably, one could argue that Pollack survived in a relatively bleak film and political landscape because his lack of a clearly defined artistic personality or social outlook kept him afloat while stronger and more committed personalities went under. His very ability to adjust successfully, as the radical 1970s gave way to the Carter, Reagan and Bush years, suggests a malleability that is not entirely to his credit.

Pollack made much of his "middle American" background, somewhat unusual for a Jewish-American artist, and his practical, hard-nosed approach. In a 1966 interview, Pollack complained that US filmmakers were still relying on "horizontal filmmaking," or "straight-line melodramatic narration of external event," in opposition to European art directors such as François Truffaut, Federico Fellini and Michelangelo Antonioni.

However, he cautioned that the Europeans had in many cases "completely lost their ability to communicate with the mass audience; something no Hollywood filmmaker can either afford to do or would want to do." (Janet L. Meyer, *Sydney Pollack: A Critical Filmography*). Pollack advocated a synthesis of the Hollywood narrative style and the European "vertical" approach ("a single experience or incident ... explored ... to its most basic nuances, focusing on interior reactions").

One can debate the extent to which he successfully accomplished this melding, but, at any rate, a more fundamental artistic and ideological challenge in the mid-1960s was to come to terms with the state of American society as the postwar stability showed signs of extreme stress and strain: the Kennedy assassination; the exposure of deep and enduring poverty in Appalachia; the radicalization of the civil rights movement; the riots in Harlem and Watts; the murder of Malcolm X; the emergence of a student protest movement, especially in opposition to the US military intervention in Southeast Asia.

In a film industry purged of left-wing elements, however, searching social criticism that could have helped make sense of these developments was in short supply. Various brands of Democratic Party liberalism were the best that was readily available to Pollack and others. To what extent the filmmaker came into contact with more radical trends during the heady days of the late 1960s and early 1970s is not clear.

Nonetheless, the emergence of social upheavals in the late 1960s

obligated the more thoughtful elements within American filmmaking to question the supposed solidity and near invincibility of US capitalism. One of the forms that questioning took was a new look at the Great Depression years, the first time the subject of harsh social conditions in America could be approached by major films since the late 1940s.

Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* in 1967 was followed by Pollack's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* in 1969, Robert Aldrich's *Emperor of the North Pole* in 1973, Robert Altman's *Thieves Like Us* in 1974, Walter Hill's *Hard Times* in 1975 and Hal Ashby's *Bound for Glory* in 1976; one could also include Roger Corman's exploitation film *Bloody Mama* in 1970, Martin Scorsese's semi-exploitation *Boxcar Bertha* in 1972, the "lighter side" of the Depression in George Roy Hill's *The Sting* and Peter Bogdanovich's *Paper Moon*, both from 1973, and British filmmaker John Schlesinger's *Day of the Locust* in 1975, among others ("The Waltons," about a Depression-era family, had its debut on network television in 1972).

To do him justice, Pollack's work is one of those that treats the social misery of the 1930s most directly. Adapted from a 1935 novel by Horace McCoy, a 'hard-boiled' writer of the Depression era, *They Shoot Horses* takes place entirely within the confines of a hall where a dance marathon is being staged. The contestants are vying for a prize of $1,500, to be theirs if they can outlast their competitors over the course of weeks of exhausting effort.

The film focuses on Gloria (Fonda), her partner Robert (Michael Sarrazin), the seedy promoter (Gig Young) and a few of the other dancers. Gloria is deeply despondent when the contest begins and its sordid ups and downs, including the discovery that the prize money is a fraud, send her over the edge. In the end, she asks Robert to shoot her and put her out of her misery, which he does.

In an interview in 1970, Pollack remarked on the strong response the film elicited from critics and audiences: "There is a poverty of spirit today as well as a poverty of body. Human nature doesn't change. The elements in human nature that produced the dance marathon still exist. That kind of exploitation still goes on."

The notion that "elements in human nature" produced the misery of the Depression would have been unthinkable on the left in an earlier epoch. A concrete socialist critique of conditions had been replaced by rather banal handwringing about supposedly universal human failings. That Pollack absorbed such ideas, prevalent in liberal circles in the aftermath of the war and the Holocaust, is not his fault, but there is no indication that he ever looked terribly closely at these trite and wrongheaded conceptions.

Aside from its undoubted merit as a pioneering portrait of the Depression, *They Shoot Horses* does not stand up very well. Fonda's performance and Young's still make an impact, but the claustrophobic staging, unattractive lighting and rather overwrought performances by some of the others in the cast detract from the overall effect. The semi-hysterical and self-pitying atmosphere tends to divert attention from the life and era being depicted.

Pollack's next film, *Jeremiah Johnson* (1972), reveals something about the contradictory impulses of the radical 1960s. Originally a project of Robert Redford, who starred in it, the film treats a legendary "mountain man" and Indian killer of the mid-19th century. On the one hand, the film apparently argues for human society and sociability, as every effort by its hero to isolate himself brings unhappiness. On the other hand, visually and viscerally, in its treatment of nature, its rugged individualism, its apparent disgust for urban life and civilization, the film (co-written by John Milius) hints at the emergence of the ecological movement and the nastier forms of "libertarianism."

Another even more sensitive subject that Pollack, to his credit, felt obliged to treat was McCarthyism, at least obliquely, in *The Way We Were*. (Only Martin Ritt's *The Front*, 1976, took up the subject head-on until the 1990s.) Here, even more than was the case with *They Shoot Horses*, however, Pollack's left liberalism and lack of artistic depth proved woefully inadequate.

There is no doubt a sociological significance to the fact that a film whose central female protagonist is an unrepentant Communist Party member (Barbra Streisand as Katie) was a box office success in 1973. But sociology is not everything.

Katie meets Hubbell (Redford) at university in the late 1930s; she's an aggressive campus radical, at the time propagandizing for the Spanish Loyalist cause and against a new world war. He's a fine athlete and aspiring writer, a handsome man to whom "everything came too easy." A few years later, they meet in New York and eventually, somewhat hesitatingly on his part, fall in love and marry.

They move to Hollywood, and Hubbell succumbs to the pressures and blandishments of the film industry. One of those pressures is the blacklist and Katie's vocal opposition to McCarthyism, which threatens his lucrative career. Hubbell enters into an affair with an old love. The marriage breaks up.

One might say, here was Pollack's chance to deal with complex historical and psychological questions and he took the least line of resistance at almost every point. The film feels perhaps three times removed from a serious treatment. Arthur Laurents' book, loosely based on an actual relationship, may be weak to begin with. Redford is more effective as the 'golden boy' who gives way under pressure, but Streisand, for the most part, is directed badly. She's strident and obnoxious as the political activist. As for her politics, they chiefly amount to support for Franklin Roosevelt and, ultimately, the Second World War. That may not be inaccurate as far as Stalinism goes, but it hardly represents a genuinely left-wing viewpoint.

Only at a few moments, when the two performers restrain themselves, does something sensitive and painful come across. There are fleeting hints at the historical and personal tragedy of the postwar period, but not much more.

According to Janet L. Meyer in her *Sydney Pollack: A Critical Filmography*, "Pollack explains that the relationship between men and women is the only thing that really interests him, because 'it's a metaphor for everything else in life.'" Again, the problems of our historical period and the general intellectual decline weigh in. Pollack could be speaking for an entire generation of filmmakers, including the vast majority of those currently working.

It's not true that the relationship between men and women is a metaphor "for everything else in life." Society and history have quite distinct laws, which are not governed or simply foreshadowed in the relationship between the sexes. That relationship has a relatively unaltered physiological basis; social reality changes constantly, producing changes in human psychology.

The reduction of life in art to a series of private encounters is a sign of cultural stagnation or degeneration. In fact, it means not being able to make sense of individual psychological life either, which receives impulses from the social environment. Pollack falls down on this continually. Oddly enough, or perhaps not so oddly, it is precisely in the depiction of "the relationship between men and women" that he is at his weakest, that he gets things most wrong.

In *The Yakuza* (1975), for example, a more or less effective crime drama, he has his character Harry Kilmer (Robert Mitchum) return to Tokyo after more than two decades and visit his old love, Eiko (Keiko Kishi). She greets him rapturously as though he'd been away a week or two. The scene fails utterly to convince, as does their relationship throughout the film.

In *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), a thriller obviously influenced by the Watergate scandal and Nixon's antidemocratic conspiracies, Redford, as a rogue CIA agent on the run (because he uncovers a secret US plot to invade the Middle East!), kidnaps a female hostage (Faye Dunaway). In

one of the film's most contrived moments, a discussion of her black-and-white photographs leads to a sexual encounter.

In *Absence of Malice* (1981), a subdued and effective work, liquor wholesaler and son of a mobster Michael Gallagher (Paul Newman) is falsely painted as a suspect in a murder investigation in an article by a newspaper reporter, Megan Carter (Sally Field). Although his life is turned upside down and his business ruined, this doesn't prevent Michael from falling for Megan. Even after a close friend of his commits suicide as a result of the newspaper's stories, Michael still considers continuing his affair with Megan at the end of the film.

One of the most absurd mishandlings of sexual relations comes in *Havana* (1990), a film set on the eve of the Cuban revolution in 1959. The work seems to be a response to the Reagan-Bush years and in particular Washington's machinations against the Sandinistas and other Central American guerrilla movements; it is surprisingly sympathetic to the revolution. It is one of Pollack's most 'left' films, and convincing in many of its details. But the film loses a good deal of credibility when Bobby Duran (Lena Olin), a Swedish sympathizer of the revolution, goes to bed with American gambler Jack Weil (Redford again), shortly after her husband has apparently been murdered and she's been tortured by the secret police! The scenes are simply absurd and unworthy.

Pollack carried on with this kind of thing to the end of his career, including the forgettable *Random Hearts* (1999), with Kristin Scott Thomas and Harrison Ford coming together under trying circumstances.

This rather crude approach to male-female relations, as a "metaphor for opposing points of view" (Meyer), is misguided and misleading. All opposites don't attract, nor need they. There are social complexities and conflicts that can't be solved in the bedroom. It's a little troubling to have to point this out. Moreover, one has the suspicion that more than a trace of opportunism entered into Pollack's 'philosophical' considerations. It seems possible that the director came up with his conception working backward from the need to have his leading performers go weak in the knee for one another.

As noted above, Pollack suffered less from the end of the radicalization of the 1960s and 1970s than did his contemporaries like Penn, Altman, Sidney Lumet, Francis Ford Coppola and others. His "practicality," technical proficiency, lack of overriding artistic or political commitment, rendered him the type of liberal filmmaker who could continue working more or less unshaken.

Indeed Pollack enjoyed his greatest success during the Reagan years with *Tootsie* (1982), an amusing film about an unemployable, intransigent "Method" actor (Dustin Hoffman) who dresses as a woman and becomes a soap opera star, and *Out of Africa* (1985), a poor film based on the writings of Isak Dinesen (pen name for Danish author Karen Blixen).

The latter film, set in British-ruled Kenya around World War I, is not so dreadful as its critical reputation would lead one to believe. Again, the love relationship and the attempt to use this as a metaphor for broader questions are the film's least developed or convincing features. Redford's Denys Finch Hatton refuses to be "owned" by Karen (Meryl Streep), who mistrusts his desire to be free and 'master of his own fate.' Does this effectively reproduce the state of Africa under colonial rule? In what way? The effort to make the love relations comment on a social problem is simply wrongheaded and contrived.

Streep is actually quite charming and amusing at moments, but placing the irritating love affair at the center of things cheapens and trivializes the work. Again, the impact of the political retreat of formerly 'radicalized' social layers, the turn to hedonism and 'self' by a considerable portion of the middle classes in the 1980s, as well as their growing wealth and social insulation, make themselves felt.

After *Havana*, which was not well received, there is little to Pollack's directing career. A bland adaptation of John Grisham's best-seller *The Firm* (1993), a nod to anti-Reagan, anti-corporate sentiments, but without much bite; a weak remake of Billy Wilder's *Sabrina*, one of the latter's more tepid films, in 1995; the Thomas-Ford combination in *Random Hearts*; and the 2005 "liberal fantasy" about the United Nations and various federal agencies, The Interpreter.

Pollack left a stronger impression as an actor during those years: particularly in Woody Allen's underrated *Husbands and Wives* (1992), as Jack, the lawyer who temporarily trades in his wife for a much younger woman, and Tony Gilroy's *Michael Clayton* (2007), as Marty Bach, the ruthless head of a powerful law firm.

What is the balance sheet? One has the impression of an energetic, conscientious, honest individual of genuine but limited artistic abilities. Of course, the interaction between artistic talent and objective social conditions is immensely complicated and dynamic. Would the filmmaker have flourished in a healthier atmosphere or, in fact, did he come closer to his potential than many others?

What we can say is that Pollack worked under distinctly disadvantageous conditions, a generally reactionary climate and a declining American film industry, whose intellectual heart and soul had been removed. To his credit, he resisted to some degree the sharp turn to the right and social indifference carried out by wide layers of the formerly liberal and left petty bourgeoisie in the past quarter-century. He maintained, through his various producing and acting undertakings, some degree of principle and independence. The films are watchable and coherent, some of them provide a glimpse at trends and processes in American life. It's not enough, but the failure has been a generalized one.