

Trumbo and the Hollywood blacklist

David Walsh
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Directed by Peter Askin, screenplay by Christopher Trumbo

Trumbo is opening in New York City this week. This comment on the film was originally posted as part of the coverage of the 2007 Toronto film festival.

Trumbo takes up the life and career of screenwriter and novelist Dalton Trumbo (1905-76), one of the so-called Hollywood Ten, Communist Party members active in the film industry, who went to jail in 1950 for contempt of Congress at the height of the McCarthyite witch-hunt. Trumbo, once one of the most highly paid writers in Hollywood, was subsequently blacklisted until 1960, although a number of his scripts made their way to the screen attributed to other individuals (known as “fronts”).

Based on the stage play by his son, Christopher Trumbo, which consisted of two actors reading some of Trumbo’s often amusing and elaborately-composed letters, the film, directed by Peter Askin, widens out a bit to consider details of the writer’s life. His son and daughter Mitzi weigh in with their memories and opinions. Ninety-year-old Kirk Douglas, who helped break the blacklist by openly employing Trumbo on *Spartacus*, makes an appearance.

The letters, or portions of them, are read by a talented group of performers: Donald Sutherland, Liam Neeson, Joan Allen, David Strathairn, Michael Douglas, Brian Denehy, Paul Giamatti, Nathan Lane and Josh Lucas.

The letters take up a variety of subjects and convey an equally wide variety of their author’s moods. In one, Trumbo takes on a telephone company official with whom he was having a conflict, informing his correspondent: “When we Reds come into power, we are going to shoot merchants in the following order: (1) those who are greedy, and (2) those who are witty. Since you fall into both categories, it will be a sad story when we finally lay hands on you.”

In another, Trumbo extols the virtues of masturbation

to his son, by now a college student. He angrily writes to the principal of his daughter’s school during the anticommunist hysteria, decrying the young girl’s “slow murder” at the hands of bullies egged on by their “patriotic” parents. He denounces this “barbarism parading as American virtue.” A condolence letter to the mother of a young man who had agreed to be one of his fronts, read by Joan Allen, is deeply moving and human.

In response to efforts by liberals in 1956 to legitimize informing, Trumbo wrote, “[I]f I could take a census of all the American faces I have seen and of all the dead whose graves I have looked on, if I could ask them one simple question: ‘Would you like a man who told on his friends?’ there would not be one among them who would answer ‘Yes.’”

Looked at closely, Trumbo’s life brings out a number of issues, including troubling ones, bound up with the history and evolution of American radicalism in the 20th century. The film approaches certain issues and shies away from others.

Born in Montrose, Colorado, in 1905, Trumbo eventually moved to Los Angeles in 1924 working on the night shift in a bakery for nearly a decade. Determined to be a writer, he was first published in *Vanity Fair* magazine and later became the managing editor of the *Hollywood Spectator*. He wrote his first novel, *Eclipse*, in 1934, the same year he went to work for Warner Brothers as a reader of scripts. After writing numerous ‘B’ movies, Trumbo, by 1940, had worked his way up to writing *A Bill of Divorcement* (John Farrow), with Maureen O’Hara, and *Kitty Foyle* (Sam Wood), with Ginger Rogers; the latter won him an Academy Award nomination.

In 1939, Trumbo’s *Johnny Got His Gun* was published. The novel, a scathing attack on war and war-makers, is one of his most outspoken works. Donald Sutherland recites a portion of it in the film. It includes

passages like this, describing efforts by the ruling classes to conceal the nature of imperialist war: “To fight that war they would need men and if men saw the future they wouldn’t fight. So they were masking the future they were keeping the future a soft quiet deadly secret. They knew that if all the little people all the little guys saw the future they would begin to ask questions. They would ask questions and they would find answers and they would say to the guys who wanted them to fight they would say you lying thieving sons-of-bitches we won’t fight we won’t be dead we will live we are the world we are the future and we will not let you butcher us no matter what you say no matter what speeches you make no matter what slogans you write.”

Once Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941 and the US entered World War II, Trumbo, presumably in the Stalinist periphery at this time, withdrew his novel and suppressed it for the duration of the war. He actually joined the Communist Party in 1943.

The film would make nothing more of Trumbo than a ‘contrarian’ liberal and a defender of the US Constitution. It cites his comment that the CPUSA, with 80,000 members, was not as dangerous “as the Elks” [a fraternal order] and had a lot fewer guns. This has been a common refrain heard from a certain layer of former CP members or apologists (Abe Polonsky and others). It surely begs the question. A party founded on the principles of Bolshevism and advocating social revolution in the US would have been ‘dangerous’ with one-tenth that membership.

Tragically, the party Trumbo joined in 1943 was a Stalinized organization, utterly unprincipled and opportunist, dedicated to the proposition that communism was “20th century Americanism.” Did he join it because he thought it was a revolutionary party, or because he thought it wasn’t? The answer may not be so clear-cut.

Whatever the full picture, it is impossible to believe that the Russian Revolution, the anticommunist raids in the US after World War I, the great battle over the fate of Sacco and Vanzetti, the Scottsboro boys’ case and the other episodes that left such a mark on a generation of artists and intellectuals in the US, as well as socialist-minded workers, left Trumbo untouched. It would have been enlightening to hear his views on those events. A final shot of Trumbo with an American flag in the

background is an unfortunate concession to prevailing moods or what are perceived to be prevailing moods.

To make sense of this complex history, a thorough and uncompromising break with anticommunism—one of the legacies of the witch-hunt itself!—or all concessions to it, is a first requirement. It should be noted that American liberalism almost entirely surrendered to the disgraceful and debilitating blacklist. And the decomposing corpse of official American liberalism is in the process of capitulating to the new McCarthyism, waged in the name of the “war on terror.”

Nonetheless, the commitment of the performers involved obviously speaks to their concerns about present-day events.

In his director’s statement, Peter Askin makes reference to changing circumstances and his own political evolution. He notes that when he was first given a volume of Trumbo’s collected letters in 1999, “the Florida re-count hanging chad events, much less the Patriot Act, and Iraq, still lay beyond the horizon. Trumbo’s Blacklist had occurred a lifetime ago and, surely, in a different America. ... [P]ost gender politics seemed more relevant. Sadly, we know better now.

“Now, eight years later, Trumbo’s words ring prophetic, his fight against the perversion of American ideals that held sway at the height of the Cold War has new immediacy, and the cost to personal freedoms feels as threatening as anything George Orwell could have predicted.”



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