

Eli Wallach (1915-2014): Major character actor of stage, screen and television

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Eli Wallach, the versatile American character actor of stage, screen and television, who often played gruff, but goodhearted characters, died on Tuesday at the age of 98. Though rarely cast in starring roles, Wallach's career, spanning 65 years, was nearly unparalleled in its breadth and consistency. A Wallach performance was infallibly intelligent and well thought-out.

The range of his work as an actor was reflected in the Tony, Emmy and Oscar awards he received for work in theater, television and film, respectively. Wallach's Tony Award came early, for his work in Tennessee Williams' *The Rose Tattoo* (1951). The Emmy followed in 1967, for *The Poppy is Also a Flower*. While Wallach never received an Oscar nomination, he received a lifetime achievement award at the age of 94, bestowed by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for his many decades of work in the movies.

Eli Wallach was born in Brooklyn on December 7, 1915. The First World War was well underway but the United States had not yet joined in the hostilities. The Russian Revolution was nearly two years in the future. Wallach's parents were Polish Jewish immigrants who had arrived in America about five years earlier. His older brother Sam, born in 1909, came to the US as a 10-month-old infant.

The younger Wallach, at his older brother's urging, went to school at the University of Texas at Austin, which had low tuition at the time. He graduated in 1936, and then obtained a graduate degree at New York's City College. Wallach enlisted in the Army during World War II, and after the war resumed the acting classes he had begun earlier.

Wallach's film career did not begin until 1956, when he was 40 years old (he had first appeared on television five years previously). His debut role came alongside Karl Malden and Carroll Baker in Elia Kazan's *Baby*

Doll, a weak and unconvincing film for the most part. This was followed by roles in more than 90 full-length feature films, and this does not count his frequent work in the theater, often alongside his wife Anne Jackson, or his many decades of work in television.

Baby Doll was followed by some of the movies for which Wallach is best known: *The Magnificent Seven* (1960); John Huston's *The Misfits* (1961), with a screenplay by Arthur Miller; and *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly* (1967), Sergio Leone's renowned "spaghetti western," in a role that often brought Wallach on-the-street recognition from the movie-going public. In these and other films Wallach played alongside the major film stars of the day, including Yul Brynner and Steve McQueen in *The Magnificent Seven*, Clark Gable and Marilyn Monroe in *The Misfits* and Clint Eastwood in *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*.

In the course of his lengthy career Wallach worked with such directors as John Sturges, Carl Foreman, Peter Yates, Stanley Kramer, Stanley Donen, Peter Riegert, Martin Ritt, Abraham Polonsky and Lasse Hallström.

Wallach's work in film may have started late, but it lasted almost 55 years, well into his 90s. In the first decade of the 21st century, he worked with directors Eastwood, Roman Polanski and Oliver Stone. His last two roles were in Polanski's *The Ghost Writer* and Stone's *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*, both from 2010, when the actor was 94 years old.

Wallach's main love, however, was and remained the theater. He and his wife were based in New York for their entire careers. Wallach received training at New York's Actors Studio, the school launched in 1947 by Kazan, Cheryl Crawford and others. The actor's early stage roles included *Teahouse of the August Moon* and *Mister Roberts*.

While Wallach was often cast on screen as a villain, his work on stage entailed a greater variety of characters. He and Anne Jackson often appeared together and were sometimes compared to Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne. Their appearances included a revival of Jean Anouilh's *Waltz of the Toreadors* in 1973, and a revival of *The Diary of Anne Frank* in 1978. The couple performed at least twice at Joseph Papp's Public Theater in New York in the 1980s. They appeared together on several additional occasions when Wallach was near 80. In 1997, Wallach was in a year-long run of *Visiting Mr. Green*, a comedy-drama in which the 81-year-old actor played an 86-year-old widower.

As for television, here too Wallach's career stretched over nearly six decades. He appeared on most of the best-known television drama showcases during the 1950s, including Playhouse 90, Studio One and others. As of 2006, he was still on television, playing a former writer who was blacklisted in the 1950s. And that was not his last television role.

Wallach's appearance more than 60 years ago in *The Rose Tattoo* coincided with the Hollywood blacklist and the Red Scare then noisily prosecuted by Senator Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee. He may have benefited from the fact that the anti-communist blacklist was not as extensive or effective in the theatre as in Hollywood. The actor later told an interviewer that blacklisting was "in the air" at the time. "We'd sit down to read through a script, break for lunch and come back, and there'd be three people missing."

By the time Wallach's career in film took off, the blacklist was becoming less effective, and by the time of his big film appearances in the early 1960s, it had been broken.

Wallach had first-hand knowledge of the witch-hunt, however, though he rarely if ever discussed it publicly. His brother Sam, a public school teacher in New York, had joined the Communist Party in the 1930s and became the leader of the CP-influenced Teachers Union. Sam Wallach was among the first eight New York teachers fired in the McCarthy-era witch-hunt, in 1951. He was also among those witch-hunt victims who received official apologies and were awarded their pensions in the mid-1970s.

Eli Wallach was apparently never politically active.

The accounts of his career make clear that he enjoyed a close professional relationship with Elia Kazan, certainly during the filming of *Baby Doll* in the mid-1950s. This was just a few years after Kazan had infamously "named names" before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), helping to destroy the livelihoods of colleagues in Hollywood in order to advance his own career.

Kazan was justifiably scorned by the blacklist victims and their supporters in the following decades. Wallach appears to have maintained cordial relations with him, however. In 1995 he provided the narration for *Elia Kazan: A Director's Journey*, a sympathetic film portrait including long interviews with the director and only a bare mention of his notorious HUAC testimony. Kazan died in 2003 at the age of 94.

However, Wallach appears to have maintained at least professional ties to victims of the blacklist as well. In the 1960s and 1970s, he worked with both directors Martin Ritt and Abraham Polonsky, for instance.

Eli Wallach is survived by his wife Anne Jackson, to whom he was married for 66 years, and his three children, a son and two daughters. A. O. Scott, a film critic for the *New York Times*, is the grandson of Sam Wallach and the great-nephew of Eli Wallach.



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