

Film and theater director Mike Nichols dies at 83

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American film and stage director Mike Nichols died Wednesday at 83. His more notable films include *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), *The Graduate* (1967), *Catch-22* (1970), *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), *Silkwood* (1983), *Working Girl* (1988) and *Primary Colors* (1998). He also directed Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* (2003) as a mini-series for HBO.

Nichols directed Broadway productions by a disparate group of writers, including Neil Simon, David Rabe, Trevor Griffiths, Tom Stoppard, Ariel Dorfman and Harold Pinter, as well as revivals of works by Oscar Wilde, Anton Chekhov, Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman and Arthur Miller.

Nichols, whose career spanned five decades, was undoubtedly an artistically gifted individual, known for his sharp wit and urbanity as well as his considerable skill with actors. If there seems a disproportion between Nichols' genuine talents, as well as those of the innumerable performers and creative figures with whom he associated, and his ultimate body of work, that must speak, above all, to some of the social and ideological problems of the postwar period.

Born Mikhail Igor Peschkowsky in Berlin in 1931, Nichols arrived in the US with his younger brother in 1939, a few months after his father, a Russian-Jewish physician, had fled the Nazis and two years before his mother.

Nichols' maternal grandfather was Gustav Landauer, the prominent German anarchist leader murdered in May 1919 by proto-fascist forces following the collapse of the short-lived Bavarian Soviet Republic. His maternal grandmother, Hedwig Lachmann, was a poet and translator. Her German-language version of Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé* formed the basis for the libretto of Richard Strauss' one-act opera of the same name. She also translated works by Edgar Allan Poe and Honoré de Balzac, among others.

Through his mother, Nichols was also distantly related to Albert Einstein.

At the University of Chicago in the early 1950s, Nichols became involved in theatrical activities as both an actor and director. During this time, he met Elaine May and joined a cabaret revue show, the Compass Players (forerunner of Second City), to which May also belonged. The duo began doing improvisational comedy and eventually, in 1958, formed a comedy act, Nichols and May, which enjoyed considerable success over the next several years.

The pair's improvised dialogues, which they performed in clubs and on television and records, were often very funny and pointed, and remain worth watching (a number of them are accessible online). One still recalls May as the unhelpful telephone operator driving Nichols, a stranded motorist who has used his last dime to reach her, to distraction with her unintended delays and obtuseness.

The duo took shots at the funeral business in "\$65 funeral;" at Wernher von Braun, a leading figure in the development of rocket technology under the Nazis and later prominent in the US space and rocket program (von Braun sued Nichols and May to have his name removed from their

routine); at the advertising business; at the obsession of the media (at this early date!) with celebrities and related trivialities; and other absurdities of American life in the late 1950s. They also investigated mother-son relationships, adolescent dating and numerous traumas of daily life.

The comedy team's finest, sharpest moment, however, may have come at the 1959 Emmy Award ceremony, devoted to excellence in television. With an entirely straight face, the 27-year-old May—following Vice President Richard Nixon, no less—noted her considerable pride in presenting a special award.

"There will be a lot said here tonight," she said earnestly, "about excellence." She continued: "And the creative, the artistic and the skillful will all be recognized and rewarded. But what of the others in this industry? [Laughter] Seriously, there are men in the industry who go on year in and year out—quietly and unassumingly—producing garbage." To more laughter and applause, she went to announce an award "to the man who has been voted the most total mediocrity in the industry."

Nichols, as a fictional television producer, eagerly came forward to accept the honor and explain how he had gotten to this remarkable point in his career. He had held out, despite a great deal of temptation, against doing anything good. "And I'm very proud you're showing your faith in me for sticking to my one ideal: money." He went on to explain how he had happily kowtowed to every corporate sponsor, disregarded talent, and generally done his best "to offend no one on earth."

The Nichols and May style of ironic, occasionally biting comedy spoke to the intellectual atmosphere that emerged in the US following the end of the officially sponsored anti-communist hysteria identified with McCarthyism, including the blacklist in the entertainment industry. It became possible, once again, to address certain issues in public, often in a satirical fashion.

In an interesting comment, novelist and essayist Edmund White, in one of his memoirs (*Inside a Pearl: My Years in Paris*), describes cultural life in New York in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the following manner: "[E]veryone I met was a Democrat, possibly a socialist, very occasionally a communist. They all loved making wry or stinging comments about the 'military-industrial complex' ruling the United States. Our humorists were Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Mort Sahl, Jules Feiffer, Lenny Bruce—people who satirized themselves and their kind as slightly absurd, pretentious New York Jews and intellectuals, and who ridiculed America as an ignorant, destructive, war-mongering behemoth."

It became possible to address certain issues, but not all, by any means. Due to circumstances largely beyond their control, Nichols, May and the other satirists, as acerbic as they might be about specific features of American life, were in thrall to ideological assumptions that came as naturally to the vast majority of artists and intellectuals in America at the time as drawing breath.

Their ideological givens would have included a Cold War liberal brand of anti-communism, even while they deplored the brutality of Sen. Joseph McCarthy and the House Un-American Activities Committee;

accompanying or underpinning that, the identification of socialism with the Soviet Union and the Stalinist parties; social complacency, based on the wealth of American capitalism and their own relatively privileged positions; obligatory and ritualistic obeisance to the greatness of “American democracy;” and, at one level or another, adaptation to the cultural regression associated with the traumas (fascism, Stalinism) of the mid-century and the decline of the workers’ movement.

In the end, in my view, these intellectual restraints help explain why someone as talented as Nichols was so unprepared for and disoriented by the upheavals of the 1970s and beyond, at the center of which lay the historic decline of American capitalism and associated global shifts, and largely unable to translate contemporary realities into genuinely meaningful imagery.

In 1986, the director told the *Washington Post*, “I think maybe my subject is the relationships between men and women, centered around a bed.” Does that seem entirely adequate to our harsh and volatile times? At a certain point, Nichols seemed very much at sea. One is not astonished to learn, for example, that he considered suicide in the 1980s.

In any event, at Elaine May’s instigation (she apparently felt the duo had gone as far as they could), Nichols and May broke up at the height of their popularity in 1961. Nichols moved into directing in the theater, enjoying great commercial success with fairly unimportant works by Simon and others from 1963 to 1966. Warner Brothers then offered him the opportunity to direct the film version of Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, with Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, then the most widely covered celebrity couple, and Nichols’ career in film began.

The film centers on the warfare between a frustrated associate history professor at a New England college, George (Burton), and his bitter, alcoholic wife, Martha (Taylor), the daughter of the college president, during a late-night visit by a new instructor at the college (George Segal) and his wife (Sandy Dennis). George and Martha torment each other and embroil the other couple in their battles over the course of one night.

Albee’s play, commented critic Andrew Sarris, “touched a sociological nerve” in its treatment of academic and middle class existence and its serious discontents. Burton’s performance, in particular, stands up in its “electrifying charm” (Sarris again). “George” and “Martha” surely suggested a wider meaning, referring as they do to the names of the first president of the United States, George Washington, and his wife. The picture of suburban, petty bourgeois American life presented was not a pretty one.

Nichols’ next film, *The Graduate*, saw him attain a popular and critical triumph that he never perhaps again achieved. In brief, the film, based on a 1963 novel by Charles Webb, focuses on Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman), a recent college graduate, who allows himself to be seduced by an older acquaintance, Mrs. Robinson (Anne Bancroft), the wife of his father’s law partner, and proceeds to fall for the woman’s daughter, Elaine (Katharine Ross).

Nichols’ film, along with Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde*, which came out the same year, is credited with signifying the change-over from “Old” to “New Hollywood,” whatever that quite means. In any event, in its relative moral looseness and flexibility, and sneering at various establishment values and institutions, *The Graduate* helped register a shift in moods, ultimately associated with the growing radicalism of sections of young people, in particular.

Hoffman, in a performance that created his career, and Bancroft (a terribly undervalued performer throughout her career) are very affecting and convincing, and Ross is fine too. Nichols’ eclectic style seems less irritating today than it did at the time, most likely because at least it’s an attempt at a style in place of the almost universal blandness we encounter today in Hollywood. His imitations of Fellini, Antonioni, Bergman and certain French auteurs indicated a knowledge of something outside the immediate confines of the industry in southern California.

In the denouement of the film, Elaine goes through with marrying the “wrong man” before finally running off with Benjamin aboard a city bus. Sarris commended this disruption of “the suspenseful chase-to-the-altar” cliché as “the triumph of people over proceedings” and, overall, praised “the cruel beauty of this love story.”

In his *American Cinema*, published in 1968, however, the critic was quite harsh with Nichols, offering this oft-cited comment:

“Everything Mike Nichols has touched on stage and screen has turned to gold if not glory... The suspicion persisted in shamefully skeptical circles that Nichols was more a tactician than a strategist and that he won every battle and lost every war because he was incapable of the divine folly of a personal statement. No American director since Orson Welles had started off with such a bang, but Welles had followed his own road, and that made all the difference. Nichols seems too shrewd ever to get off the main highway. His is the cinema and theatre of complicity. And the customer is always right except in the long view of eternity.”

The difficulty with this verdict, although it no doubt speaks to real problems in Nichols’ career, is that it reduces the differences between Welles and Nichols, putting all other issues aside, to a moral or individual failing on Nichols’ part—his refusal to take the high, self-sacrificing road of truly independent artistry.

The key issue, however, is the sharp contrast in the historical and cultural circumstances that formed the two directors’ sensibilities: in Welles’ case, the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the explosive years of the Great Depression, when millions in America came consciously to hate big business and Wall Street and sought alternatives on many fronts, political and artistic; in Nichols’, the World War and the Cold War that followed it, characterized in America by intellectual stagnation, conformism and opportunism, the discrediting of socialism and left-wing thought generally, the constriction of artistic life and possibilities for drama.

Nichols’ next major project, *Catch-22*, based on the Joseph Heller novel about World War II, was a box office and artistic failure, from which his reputation never entirely recovered. The film version of the irreverent, moving book, although provided with a large cast and budget, seemed flat and disjointed, and lacking in genuinely anti-war, anti-military energy. Another film that came out the same year, *MASH*, directed by Robert Altman, captured more of the audience’s imagination and its increasingly oppositional sentiments about the Vietnam War.

Written by cartoonist and satirist Jules Feiffer, Nichols’ *Carnal Knowledge* is a look at the emotional and sexual decline of two college friends over the course of 25 years, from the 1940s to the 1970s. Jack Nicholson, as the womanizer whose inability to create any sort of intimacy turns to impotence, and Ann-Margret, as his unfortunate wife for a time, are memorable in a generally distasteful and misanthropic work. *The Day of the Dolphin* (1973), a science fiction-political thriller, and *The Fortune* (1975), a not very amusing semi-screwball comedy set in the 1920s, are generally forgettable works, aside from Nichols’ direction of a talented group of actors.

In *Silkwood*, Nichols honorably brought to the screen the story of Karen Silkwood, the nuclear power whistleblower who was killed in a suspicious auto accident in 1974. Meryl Streep played Silkwood, who died while investigating wrongdoing at the Kerr-McGee plutonium plant. This is an honest and sincere work.

Heartburn (1986), *Biloxi Blues* (1988), *Working Girl*, *Postcards from the Edge* (1990), *Regarding Henry* (1991) and *Wolf* (1994) are minor efforts, the best of which signal a fairly half-hearted liberal dismay at the ravages of the Reagan-Bush Sr. years. In its own way, however, *Working Girl* is actually an adaptation to the ethos of the time and the first of numerous films conveying the same general theme. It is the story of a working class heroine (Melanie Griffith) who advances from the secretarial pool to the executive suite, “making it” individually by leaving

everyone in her neighborhood and every other secretary behind.

During this time as well, Nichols married Diane Sawyer (of the nauseating “chin-on-hand sincerity”), the television news anchor and longtime co-host of ABC’s “Good Morning America.” Sawyer, one of the personifications of “total mediocrity” and worse (in fact, a promilitary, pro-war propagandist) in contemporary television, had early in her career been a member of Nixon’s White House staff and was closely associated with the president himself. In the very possibility of this union, sadly, one sees a certain irony, a coming full-circle in Nichols’ personal and moral evolution.

Nichols’ *Primary Colors*, based on a *roman à clef* by journalist Joe Klein about Bill Clinton’s first presidential campaign in 1992 (with a screenplay by Elaine May), was released in the midst of Clinton’s second-term crisis, involving his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. The film, featuring John Travolta and Emma Thompson as the would-be Democratic presidential nominee and his spouse, is a fairly unflattering picture of American politics and politicians and packs a certain punch.

On the *World Socialist Web Site*, we commented on *What Planet Are You From?* (2000), with Gary Shandling, a science fiction comedy, noting that “there are a few amusing moments in the film, but not many. As with so many contemporary films that seek to be marketable, *What Planet Are You From?*, almost by default one feels, ends up in the most conformist and complacent territory: the sanctity of marriage, the family, home, etc.”

Misanthropy dominated Nichols’ *Closer* (2004), a film, we argued, that communicated a “deep cynicism.” The film conveyed the sentiment that “‘People are filthy, they’re not worth lifting a finger for’... Since humanity is hopeless, according to this logic, one is free to do or say anything, with a clear conscience.”

The director’s *Charlie Wilson’s War* (2007) told the story of the US congressman who claimed credit for the program that organized and supported the Afghan mujahideen in their fight with the Soviet army in Afghanistan—and thus can also claim some responsibility for 9/11 and everything that has come after it. We argued that the film was saturated with anti-communism and defended “the right of American ‘democracy’ to intervene wherever it likes around the globe. Its relatively minor amusements are like chocolate icing on a poisoned cake.”

Nichols, along with the rest of what passes for an intelligentsia in America, had no doubt turned generally to the right. But it would be wrong to portray matters in an entirely one-sided manner. His direction of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, which takes a scathing look at the anti-communist witch-hunts and the persecution of the Rosenbergs, indicated an enduring concern with great and tragic historical matters.

In the 1997 film version (directed by David Hare) of Wallace Shawn’s play *The Designated Mourner*, set in an unnamed country under a police-military dictatorship that is imprisoning all opponents suspected of “subversion,” Nichols turned in an extraordinary performance as Jack, an English professor and the chief narrator. Despite his liberal profession, Jack is generally sympathetic to the government and hostile to any opposition. He sees his intellectual rival, a well-respected poet, killed and his wife dragged away without lifting a finger. It is a chilling portrayal, in which Nichols brought something of his past social opposition and anger to bear.

Likewise, Nichols was highly complimentary about socialist playwright Trevor Griffiths’ *These Are the Times: A Life of Thomas Paine* (2005), an unfilmed screenplay. Nichols commented: “Paine [a hero of the American Revolution] is a man of a kind we will not see again, to put it mildly, and so is Griffiths.”

So, even as one feels the need to be quite sharp about Nichols’ artistic failings, the main emphasis has to be on the generally unfavorable ideological and cultural circumstances facing artists in the 1950s and beyond. This was a talented individual swept up by strong currents, which may well have taken him places he had no desire to go.



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