

# *Trumbo* and the history of the Hollywood blacklist

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*Directed by Jay Roach; written by John McNamara, based on the book by Bruce Cook*

The story of the anti-communist Hollywood witch-hunt in the late 1940s and early 1950s that destroyed careers, wrecked marriages and drove some to an early death—along with virtually criminalizing left-wing thought in the film industry—has been told before, both in book form and, generally less successfully, on screen.

*Trumbo*, the new movie written by John McNamara and directed by Jay Roach (best known for the Austin Powers films), reviews this subject through the career of Dalton Trumbo, among the most gifted screenwriters of the 1940s. He was one of the Hollywood Ten, the group of writers and directors hauled before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and eventually jailed on contempt charges.

Trumbo (Bryan Cranston) was the most prominent member of this group who were the original victims of the Hollywood witch-hunt. When the anti-communist campaign began in earnest, he was already known for work on such films as *A Bill of Divorcement* (1940), *Kitty Foyle* (1940), *A Guy Named Joe* (1943), *Tender Comrade* (1943), *Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo* (1944) and *Our Vines Have Tender Grapes* (1945).

The film focuses primarily on Trumbo's life and career from the beginning of the witch-hunt in 1947 until the end of the Hollywood blacklist in 1960, and then brings the story forward briefly until the writer's death in 1976. There are some obvious and significant limitations.

This is not a film that acknowledges, let alone examines, the complexity of left-wing and socialist politics in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. Its attitude toward Stalinism, which destroyed the Communist Party as a revolutionary force and transformed it into an accomplice—with distinctly criminal implications—of the Soviet bureaucracy, is neutral, if not benign. *Trumbo*, to be blunt, cannot be taken seriously as an examination of the fate of the American left. One has the sense that those who made this film have not delved all that deeply into history.

Nevertheless, this film does have certain significant saving graces. For that reason *Trumbo's* appearance is important and timely.

The opening intertitles are highly unusual in a Hollywood film: we are told that many movie figures joined the Communist Party, some during the depths of the 1930s Depression and others during the World War II, when the Soviet Union was a US ally.

This presentation of left-wing political affiliations is rarely acknowledged so prominently in the usual histories of American film, much less on the screen itself. It raises vital issues about an important period in US cultural and political life, one whose consequences are still felt today.

There are many worthwhile moments and excellent performances in *Trumbo*, along with some humor that is not out of place even in the somber circumstances. A mixture of newsreel footage and reenactments is used to show important moments, including the grilling of the screenwriter in the HUAC hearings chaired by notorious New Jersey Congressman J. Parnell Thomas.

We also see brief footage of Richard Nixon, the actor Robert Taylor and Senator Joseph McCarthy. In the immediate background is the anti-Semitic gossip columnist Hedda Hopper (Helen Mirren), along with a right-wing cabal in Hollywood in which John Wayne and Ronald Reagan figure prominently. Trumbo's confrontation with Wayne, in which he deflates the actor's phony heroic on-screen persona, is one of the film's highlights.

There is also an effective scene where MGM mogul Louis B. Mayer, outraged by the labor militancy displayed in the bitter 1945-46 strike by set decorators, is frightened by Hedda Hooper, who threatens to remind her millions of readers of the producer's Jewish background. All this takes place against the political background of the escalating Cold War against the Soviet Union.

Trumbo is full of illusions that the First Amendment will protect him and his Communist Party comrades. But his appearance before the House Committee on Un-American Activities is a disaster. He is indicted for contempt of

Congress, found guilty and sentenced to prison. Trumbo was jailed for 11 months beginning in June 1950. The film records his humiliating introduction to prison life. He emerges from prison amidst the seemingly permanent grip of the blacklist. Sen. McCarthy is riding high, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg are tried and then executed on espionage conspiracy charges.

After his release, the writer finds work churning out B movie scripts, 30 pages a day—working, as he declares, 18 hours a day and seven days a week. Remarkably, one of the films—*The Heist*—has entered into film history. The attendant stresses threaten his marriage and family life. Along the way, he manages to write several scripts that win Academy Awards, *Roman Holiday* in 1953 and *The Brave One* in 1957. These, of course, could not be submitted in Trumbo's name: for the 1953 film he uses a friend, writer Ian McLellan Hunter, as a "front," and the award for *The Brave One* is announced as going to Robert Rich, a pseudonym.

Both of these Oscar moments are shown on screen in video footage, as the Trumbo family watches in the reenactment with a mixture of joy and frustration. This is an effective depiction of the painful reality of the blacklist and the years-long struggle to overcome it.

The Hollywood ban finally ends after famed director Otto Preminger and actor Kirk Douglas both publicly announce Trumbo's role in films of theirs eventually released in 1960—first *Exodus*, directed by Preminger, and then *Spartacus*, starring Douglas and directed by Stanley Kubrick.

As already noted, *Trumbo* benefits from some excellent acting, most notably that of Bryan Cranston. Cranston is known especially for the cable television series *Breaking Bad*. His performance is obviously central in a movie in which he is the title character, and he is very successful in depicting the writer's mordant wit, a certain tactical flair when fighting his enemies, and a way with words that conveys both optimism and also a hardened realism.

John Goodman is amusing in an exaggerated role as Frank King, the B-movie mogul who hires Trumbo strictly for business reasons, but demonstrates his own willingness to stand up to the witch-hunters. This is a bit of comic relief, but apparently there is at least some truth to Goodman's characterization.

Helen Mirren is suitably vicious and duplicitous as Hopper, and Michael Stuhlbarg must be mentioned in an effective performance as the famed actor Edward G. Robinson, who eventually caved in to the witch-hunt to save his acting career, but lived with a guilty conscience thereafter. Robinson's fate was especially tragic as he had provided significant financial support to the early victims of

the witch-hunt.

Louis C.K. plays Arlen Hird, a fictional composite character summing up several of the Hollywood Ten who clashed with Trumbo over what they considered political softness on his part. Diane Lane is Cleo Trumbo, the writer's wife. In a small role, Dean O'Gorman, an actor from New Zealand, looks amazingly like the younger Kirk Douglas. Douglas, one is pleased to report, is still alive and just a few weeks short of his 99th birthday.

The brief disagreements between Hird and Trumbo that are dramatized in the film are not developed further. This would admittedly be a difficult job. Stalinism during the years of the Popular Front and the wartime alliance openly abandoned any struggle for the political independence of the working class. Its supporters in Hollywood were miseducated in this spirit, as the CP adopted a super-patriotic line and became indistinguishable from liberalism. Some of this outlook is reflected in dialogue here, as when Trumbo seeks to explain to his daughter that communism is equivalent to sharing a sandwich with a classmate who has nothing to eat.

The postwar witch-hunt with which *Trumbo* deals, however, was a vicious assault on the Bill of Rights and the US Constitution. An attack on the Communist Party from the right, it was directed against the working class, and fueled in part by anger over postwar films that, whatever their weaknesses, explored social and political themes.

The presence of some prominent actors in *Trumbo*, including Cranston, Mirren, Goodman and others, undoubtedly reflects concerns on their part with the legacy of the blacklist as well as the timeliness of this story for today. Director Jay Roach has called it a "cautionary tale," and pointed to contemporary attacks on free speech.

Dalton Trumbo waged a long and principled struggle against this anti-democratic campaign, and generations of moviegoers who know little or nothing of this history will benefit from seeing this film, especially if they go further in studying this cultural and political history.



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