

May a word be spoken on behalf of Kevin Spacey?

David Walsh

1 November 2017

American actor Kevin Spacey is one of the most gifted and significant performers of his generation. He has been nominated more than 80 times for awards for acting in film, television and theater. Spacey has won over 50 awards, including two Academy Awards, a Tony Award and a Golden Globe Award. He has also been nominated for a Grammy Award, as well as eleven Primetime Emmy Awards.

Born in 1959 into a lower middle-class family in South Orange, New Jersey and having grown up in southern California, Spacey attended the Julliard School from 1979-81. His first professional acting work was with the New York Shakespeare Festival, in a small part in *Henry VI, Part 1*, in 1981. His initial Broadway appearance came in Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, featuring Liv Ullmann, in 1982. He made his film debut in Mike Nichols' *Heartburn* in 1986.

In one of his first substantial acting efforts, Spacey performed in director Jonathan Miller's version of Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* in 1986, which starred Jack Lemmon. Spacey was to appear with Lemmon, whom he considered a mentor and to whom he became close, on a number of occasions. They both featured in *The Murder of Mary Phagan* (1988), a television miniseries about the infamous 1913 Leo Frank case, and the film version of David Mamet's caustic play about the real estate trade, *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992). In 1991, Spacey played famed lawyer and civil libertarian Clarence Darrow in a television movie (*Darrow*).

Spacey came to national and international prominence in the mid-1990s, in such films as *Swimming with Sharks* (1994), *The Usual Suspects* (1995) and *Se7en* (1995). By the time he received an Academy Award for Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999), the versatile Spacey had become one of the most recognizable American movie actors. He continued his film work into the new century, co-writing, co-producing, directing and starring in *Beyond the Sea* (2004), about singer Bobby Darin.

Spacey had meanwhile become involved in the theater in London. In 2003, he announced his plan to become the artistic director of the Old Vic, one of the city's oldest theaters. He undertook to remain in the position for 10 years and to attract performers to the theater and appear in various productions.

True to his word, in 2005, for example, Spacey played the title role in Shakespeare's *Richard II*, directed by Trevor Nunn. The following year he appeared at the Old Vic in O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Other plays in which he performed there included *Inherit the Wind* (Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee), Mamet's *Speed-the-Plow*, Maria Goos' *Cloaca*, Shakespeare's *Richard III* and a single-character play by David Rintels, *Clarence Darrow*. A new artistic director took over from Spacey in 2015.

In recent years, Spacey has made a new name for himself as Frank Underwood, the conniving and conspiratorial South Carolina politician, in the Netflix series, *House of Cards* (2013-17). Whatever Spacey's own political illusions (he considers himself a friend of former president Bill Clinton), the Underwood character has done a good deal to undermine illusions in the corrupt, murderous world of Washington politics.

Spacey brings considerable intelligence and depth, combined often with irony and slyness, to both classical and popular genres. Is there any question but that film, television and theater would have been tangibly poorer without his presence over the past quarter-century?

Now, at least for the time being, Spacey's career lies in ruins. On Sunday, actor Anthony Rapp, for reasons best known to himself, accused Spacey in an interview of making sexual advances to him some thirty years ago when he was 14 and Spacey was 26.

The accusation comes in the midst of escalating charges of sexual harassment and abuse set off by the allegations by numerous women against Harvey Weinstein and various others, including writer-director James Toback.

In his statement, Spacey said, "I honestly do not remember the encounter, it would have been over 30 years ago. But if I did behave as he describes, I owe him the sincerest apology for what would have been deeply inappropriate drunken behavior, and I am sorry for the feelings he describes having carried with him all these years."

He continued, "As those closest to me know, in my life, I have had relationships with both men and women. I have loved and had romantic relationships with men throughout my life, and I choose now to live as a gay man."

Not only is Spacey being denounced for his actions several decades ago, he is also being criticized for the decision to acknowledge his sexual orientation at the same time he apologized for the alleged offense.

With characteristic bravery, Netflix first announced that the sixth season of *House of Cards*, currently under production, would be its last, claiming that the cancellation had nothing to do with Spacey's difficulties. On Tuesday Netflix and Media Rights Capital, the series' production company, announced that filming on the sixth season itself had been suspended. Their press announcement explained that the suspension would last "until further notice" and that the two companies needed "time to review the current situation and to address any concerns of our cast and crew." They are no longer pretending that the allegation about Spacey is not causing the series' hold-up.

The International Academy of Television Arts and Sciences announced that it was withdrawing the special International Emmy Founders Award it was planning to bestow on Spacey at a ceremony November 20 "in light of recent events." And more is undoubtedly to come.

The Old Vic was quick to throw Spacey to the wolves, issuing a statement indicating that "we are deeply dismayed to hear the allegations levied against Kevin Spacey... Inappropriate behaviour by anyone working at The Old Vic is completely unacceptable."

The current public flogging of Spacey is as shameful as it is disgusting. The incident that allegedly occurred more than three decades ago should not have happened. Even if he is culpable of improper behavior, however, that in no way justifies the current vindictive, gleeful effort to rub him out, a campaign that a Frank Underwood might well have mapped out.

The universal piling on, sanctimonious commentary and hypocritical tweets ("Twitter slams Kevin Spacey," according to *Salon*) are difficult to bear. In terms of the media, there is not much to choose from between fascistic *Breitbart News*, warming its hands over the allegations against gay or liberal and often Jewish Hollywood, and the *New York Times*, with its salacious and degenerate editors.

The *Times* writes approvingly of "those who might have supported him [but] were instead incensed by the implication that his sexuality was relevant to" Rapp's accusations. "They saw his coming out story as an intentional distraction from the accusation and a damaging conflation of homosexuality and pedophilia."

We live once again in an era of denunciations, which have the power to wreck lives overnight. And everyone is expected to chime in. Those who do not do so become suspect themselves and are liable to be denounced. Careers, status and wealth are on the line. The threat of being out of the limelight terrifies actors, directors and producers in the US perhaps more than anything.

In the official narrative, there is an almost complete absence of understanding and elementary sympathy. The accused is a

criminal, a monster, who must be destroyed.

Hollywood is a competitive hothouse, where at the best of times a deeply subjective atmosphere prevails that is ripe for this sort of scandal. Now it's payback time. Frankly, career disappointments, relationships that failed and a host of other frustrations and jealousies fuel the frenzy. Old scores of various sorts, including financial ones, are being settled, and new business arrangements formed in the midst of all this. The canny are sizing up how money is to be made under conditions of the "new morality."

Sex scandals have invariably been the province of the far right. Nothing remotely progressive will come out of this. A revived Production Code, a clampdown on "licentiousness" in films and filmmaking (which is always accompanied by the suppression of oppositional views), more powers to the censors, appointed and self-appointed—this is what's likely to emerge at the other end of this miserable process. The dominance of power and wealth, the source of the real abuses and crimes, goes untouched.

Once again it's "scoundrel time." The film world, it is clear now, has learned nothing from the McCarthyite period. The same essential modus operandi is at work: the naming of names, the guilt by association, witnesses who can't be questioned, the right-wing forces who weigh in, the studios that instantly blacklist those accused.

This is already another shameful episode in Hollywood's history. Later on, perhaps years from now, there will be expressions of regret ("Oh, yes, mistakes were made. There were unfortunate excesses"); Spacey may even be forgiven. Perhaps at a future Academy Awards ceremony he can come before an audience of the same people who drove him out, and exclaim through gritted teeth, like Charlie Chaplin at the 1972 Oscars, after his exile of twenty years, "You're wonderful, sweet people."

We argued when the Harvey Weinstein scandal erupted that this was not simply about Weinstein, that something else was going on, that something else was moving through this affair. Weinstein's piggishness and wrongdoing were merely a pretext for the flourishing of all sorts of unhealthy, reactionary issues and pressures. The assault on Spacey is confirmation of that view.

We don't make any bones about our sympathy with Kevin Spacey and our contempt for those inciting denunciations and urging on the witch-hunting hysteria.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact