

Interview with film historian Joseph McBride: For Kirk Douglas, life was “like a war—you have to fight all the time”

David Walsh
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I spoke last week to Joseph McBride, film historian and educator, and the author of more than 20 books, including a valuable biography of Kirk Douglas (1976). When McBride was writing his biography, his editor prevented him from speaking to Douglas, on the grounds that the latter might try to censor or restrict the work. Later, when McBride met the actor, who asked why he hadn't called him while writing the book, Douglas informed him he firmly believed in freedom of speech and would have done no such thing.

David Walsh: Your introduction to the book on Kirk Douglas has an appropriate title, *The Fighter*, and it makes reference to Douglas's family background, including the oppression of the Russian Jews and the family's poverty in the US, in upstate New York. And you describe his phenomenal energy, intensity—as well as the desire to please his father, which he was never able to do.

Joseph McBride: Yes, there was immigration and poverty, having to fight his way through school. Life is like a war, you have to succeed and you have to fight all the time. Once he was successful, he got his way with many productions. I read a lot of the correspondence he had with Billy Wilder and other directors. They respected him because he was smart.

DW: I think the comments you cite seem not so much directed at bumping up his own roles, but at making them somewhat more rounded or contradictory. He was quite articulate about it.

JM: In one of the obituaries this week, he is quoted saying, “When you play a strong character, find his weakness. If you play a weak character, find his strength.” It's a reasonable way of approaching a character. He played a lot of tough guys, but there is always a weakness, a significant flaw. I think Wilder's *Ace in the Hole* is a great film. He played some weaklings, but they were always complex people. *Seven Days in May* [John Frankenheimer] is a terrific, political film, about an attempted military coup in the US.

DW: It stands up, I think.

JM: The day John F. Kennedy was shot in November 1963, there was a full-page ad in the *New York Times* about the upcoming *Seven Days in May*. That film and Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* were made in 1963, but their openings were both delayed until 1964 because of the assassination.

Kennedy wanted to see *Seven Days in May* made into a movie as a warning to the country because of people like former Gen. Edwin Walker, the extreme right-wing figure, John Birch, who incited rioting against the integration of the University of Mississippi by James Meredith in 1962. Walker essentially tried to lead an insurrection. *Seven Days in May* is quite a prescient film about the

military and the US government. Burt Lancaster's character is based on a figure like that.

I found Kennedy's tape-recorded conversation during the time Walker was leading the riot at the University of Mississippi. He was saying, “How could that son of a bitch have been in charge of an Army division in Germany?” and then Ted Sorensen [Kennedy's close adviser] replied, “Have you read *Seven Days in May* [the novel, a political thriller, by Charles W. Bailey II and Fletcher Knebel, published in 1962]?” Kennedy said he had, and that it had rather awful dialogue, that the general was the most interesting character and the president was not believable.

Then, of course, there is Douglas's role in helping to end the Hollywood blacklist. There's a dispute as to whether he ended it first, by having blacklisted writer Dalton Trumbo credited on *Spartacus*, or whether Otto Preminger did it, also with Trumbo, on *Exodus*. *Spartacus* came out in October 1960 and *Exodus* in December 1960, but there are claims that Preminger acted first and then Douglas felt he had to respond to that. In any case, Kennedy actually made a point during the campaign that fall of going to see *Spartacus* as his way supporting the ending of the blacklist, which was a big deal.

Trumbo said somewhere that getting his name painted on a spot in the studio parking lot was a huge deal for him. He got his name restored. My research indicates that the blacklist began to crumble in 1957–58. I found some comments by Ward Bond, the actor and a leader of the blacklist, complaining that the studios were allowing too many leftist writers.

In any event, it took several years before it really fell apart. The blacklist did not disappear overnight. Abe Polonsky did not officially get off the blacklist until 1968, when he got a co-writing credit for *Madigan*, with Richard Widmark and directed by Don Siegel. And then Polonsky made his own film, *Tell Them Willie Boy is Here* [1969], his first feature in more than 20 years.

DW: It's interesting, Douglas's feeling about Hollywood stardom and its contradictions. In your book, you quote from an unpublished 1960 interview: “All your life you've been dreaming of wanting to act, to portray roles. Then what happens is that if you're successful at it, you become big business. A myriad of things that you never bargained for come into play. All of a sudden you are buffeted from every side and you're fortunate if you're a guy that has the right advice.”

JM: I think he was intelligent enough to realize there was a lot of hype involved with being a star. All the glamour, the kowtowing of others, the business end of it and all that. But I think he enjoyed it too,

since he started out in obscurity and poverty. He was one of those immigrants for whom the fame and glory meant a great deal, as it did for Frank Capra.

Douglas was a tough producer. He had a battle with Kubrick on *Spartacus*. Supposedly, Kubrick wanted to put his name on the script if Dalton Trumbo's name couldn't be used. Douglas thought that was outrageous. He called him "Stanley the Prick." Kubrick later said he didn't like *Spartacus*, largely, I think, because it was a film where he did not have total control, because of Douglas.

This is a telling anecdote. In *Spartacus*, Douglas and Woody Strode, the black actor, have a scene in which they fight, as gladiators. The Strode character refuses to kill Spartacus-Douglas. Afterward, the Strode character tries to kill Laurence Olivier, a wealthy Roman senator, and gets killed himself. It's a great scene, a deservedly famous one. Strode also featured in John Ford films, of course, and a lot of others.

After Woody Strode died, at the end of 1994, they held a memorial service in Hollywood at some crummy night club. I went to it, and it was a really rainy Sunday afternoon. Toward the middle of the event, Kirk Douglas slipped in. They asked, does anybody want to say anything? Douglas was the first person who put his hand up, and said, "I'd like to talk." He had driven from Palm Desert, a two-hour drive in the rain to come to the memorial. He gave a wonderful talk about how he and Woody Strode had rehearsed very intensely for that scene for two weeks. They were both athletes. Strode and Kenny Washington were the first black players in the National Football League in the modern era. Strode was an Olympic athlete and a UCLA football player, along with Jackie Robinson. Douglas had been a wrestler.

They worked out the scene in *Spartacus* with tremendous effort and camaraderie. Finally, Douglas said, I'm sorry I have to leave, I have to drive back to Palm Desert. I have an engagement. It was touching that he came all that way to honor his friend. He was 78 at the time.

Late in life, he was bar mitzvahed, perhaps for the second time. He was 83. At a temple in Westwood. He got more religious as he got older after his 1991 brush with death in a helicopter crash. But Douglas tried, I think, to use his position for betterment. He had a strong belief in justice, a lot of his films convey that sentiment. He criticized police brutality, media corruption. I came across a letter in which he said he had a profound distrust of military people, and found them generally stupid. That influenced his producing *Seven Days in May*. He was an anti-authoritarian kind of guy.

DW: You have a good passage in your book suggesting that "the life vein running through virtually all of his films is a spirited, anguished critique of the American success ethic."

JM: Yes, the "success ethic"—for example, in *Champion*, the boxing story, and *Ace in the Hole*, about ambition pursued at any cost. After Douglas became famous because of *Champion*, gossip columnist Hedda Hopper told him, "This *Champion* has really gone to your head, you know. You're such an SOB [son of a bitch] now." To which he replied, "You're mistaken. I was an SOB *before* *Champion*, but you never noticed it."

He was a well-liked figure, I think, but, as I said, he was a tough character. Domineering or challenging in a creative way. He had definite artistic opinions and he expressed them, to directors, to the studios. He wanted to exert his influence, and he produced a wide range of interesting films.

DW: *The Bad and the Beautiful*, about Hollywood, is a film I admire. Lana Turner gives one of her best performances. It's a

remarkable scene when she has that meltdown in the car.

JM: That's a scathing look at the film industry. Douglas played a character somewhat modeled on two producers, David O. Selznick, for the megalomania, and also Val Lewton, for his unusual inventiveness.

Douglas liked to play outrageously tough, even neurotic, explosive guys. He was unafraid to be dislikeable on screen. A lot of stars today have this obsession about being likeable, which is terrible. The best tradition in Hollywood, represented by Humphrey Bogart, Douglas, Lancaster and others, was one of anti-heroes. Intriguing, flawed people. Today leading actors are afraid to do that, so the studios smooth away the edges. They make characters so bland. Douglas was the opposite of that.

DW: He made generally interesting choices, within the limits of his situation. Some of the films were mediocre, or worse, but one has the feeling he tried to do interesting things.

JM: He critiqued American values, but at the same time he was a very patriotic American, like a lot of successful immigrants in that era. He traveled the world for the State Department.

He and his second wife Anne endowed 400 playgrounds in Los Angeles, in poorer neighborhoods. They gave a lot of money to schools and other institutions.

DW: What do you think are some of his best performances?

JM: *Paths of Glory*, about the French military in World War I, is an extraordinary film, very timely, very anti-war. I was hoping *1917* would go in that direction and show that the British generals were rashly sacrificing their own men. But it didn't. Kubrick went all the way with that. That was a film that was hard to get made. It was banned in France for a long time, to its credit.

Douglas is great in *Spartacus*. In *Seven Days in May* he's superb. He plays a character battling with his conscience. *Out of the Past* is a tremendous film noir. Those stand out the most for me. Also, *The Bad and the Beautiful*.

He made a good number of routine films, to keep himself viable as a star, but that's how it works. Douglas was always compelling and tried to make films that were substantial. I don't think he was ever less than committed to what he was doing, even if the material was rather ordinary. He put everything into his performances. He never merely phoned it in, he wasn't cynical about the business.

He also wrote books, novels, memoirs. *The Ragman's Son* is a very gripping autobiography.

Douglas lived a very long time. It's funny, about 15 years ago, the *LA Times* interviewed me for his advance obit. Yesterday I looked at the obit in the *LA Times* and my comments were not in there. Maybe the guy lost them, or forgot them, over the years. I was also interviewed by CNN about 15 years ago as well, and I have no idea whether they used the comments or not.

DW: He outlasted your quotes. The reports of his death were seriously premature.

JM: He lived such a long time that his advance obit was really out of date.



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