Screenwriter and blacklist victim Walter Bernstein dies at 101

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Screenwriter and blacklist victim Walter Bernstein died January 23 in New York City at the age of 101.

Bernstein worked on the screenplays for dozens of films, including *Kiss the Blood Off My Hands* (1948, with Burt Lancaster and Joan Fontaine), *That Kind of Woman* (1959, with Sophia Loren), *The Wonderful Country* (1959, with Robert Mitchum), *A Breath of Scandal* (1960), *The Magnificent Seven* (1960), *Paris Blues* (1961), *Fail Safe* (1964), *The Money Trap* (1965), *The Molly Maguires* (1970), *The Front* (1976), *Semi-Tough* (1977), *Yanks* (1979) and *Miss Evers' Boys* (1997, about the infamous "Tuskegee Study").

During the period in which he was targeted by the anti-communist witch hunt, Bernstein wrote—uncredited—for various television programs, including *Danger* and *You Are There* (a series devoted to historical reenactments, with its famous last line, delivered by Walter Cronkite, "What sort of day was it? A day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our times… and you were there").

The son of a school teacher father, Bernstein grew up in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn and attended Erasmus Hall High School. After graduation from Dartmouth College, where he joined the Young Communist League, Bernstein wrote regularly for the *New Yorker* magazine and during World War II, the G.I. weekly, *Yank*. He undertook an arduous journey in German-occupied Yugoslavia and became one of the first US journalists to obtain an interview with partisan leader and future Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito.

After demobilization, having joined the Communist Party, Bernstein returned to magazine work. A collection of his wartime writings, *Keep Your Head Down*, was published in 1946, which drew the film industry's attention. He went to Hollywood to work as a screenwriter, first with director Robert Rossen (*Body and Soul*, 1947). He had collaborated on only one screenplay when his name appeared in the scurrilous anti-communist pamphlet *Red Channels* and he found himself, in 1950, *persona non grata*. Bernstein could not write under his own name in films for eight years and in television for 11 years. *The Front*—directed by Martin Ritt, Bernstein's longtime friend and fellow blacklist victim, and featuring Woody Allen—was a semi-comical look at the Red Scare period. Allen plays a "front," i.e., an individual who lent his or her untainted name as author (generally for money) to a film or television script actually written by a blacklisted figure. Bernstein was nominated for an Academy Award for writing the film.

Bernstein's *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (1996) is a useful account of the 1930s, '40s and '50s, which sheds light on the artistic milieu that was attracted to the Communist Party and its motives and thinking.

One of the formative experiences of Bernstein's life was the six months he spent in Grenoble, France, at 16. He encountered some English students, all Communists (including future historian Robert Conquest), who "introduced" Bernstein to politics.

He writes: "There was a lot to be political about in that spring of 1936. There was Hitler and there was Mussolini. There was fascism and there was antifascism, mostly led by the left. In France a Popular Front government had just been elected, a coalition of Radical Socialists, Socialists and Communists. Trouble was brewing in Spain. There was still a Depression. Sit-down strikes had broken out. Cycling through the streets of Grenoble, we would wave to strikers hanging over the balconies of their occupied buildings and they would wave back and we would all sing 'The International.' I knew nothing of Marxism, but I had discovered proletarian internationalism."

1936 was also, of course, the year of the first Moscow Trial, in which the Stalinist regime in the USSR began the physical destruction of the generation that had led the October Revolution. Bernstein, in *Inside Out*, acknowledges that he "believed" blindly in the Soviet Union.

"I was in the grip of a new kind of patriotism," he comments, "one that transcended borders and unified disparate peoples. It insulated me from another reality… Stalin had arrested millions of people in Russia. Millions had either been shot or died in prison. Founding members of the Bolshevik Party were tried and executed as enemies of the state. I knew of the trials but not the terror; still, I paid little attention. I did not read or inquire further or question. The Soviet Union had been under constant attack since being formed; it was natural that there would be spies and saboteurs, agents of a vengeful capitalism. It was my first example of what horror can be perpetrated in the name of security and how easy then to apologize for it. The example was lost on me."

Bernstein's response in *Inside Out* to the persecution of the American Communist Party in the late 1940s, on the grounds that it represented a threat to "national security," was typical of the artists and writers in and around the Stalinists: "I also knew the Communist Party was no menace. After all, I belonged to it. The charge that we wanted to overthrow the government by force and violence was ludicrous. Nothing I had ever done or intended or even thought was designed for that. No one I knew in the Party even dreamed of it."

Considerably more farsighted, J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI and the rest of the political and intelligence establishment viewed the possibility of left-wing ideas "infecting" the US population, possibly with "American speed," as an ever-present danger. The combination of anti-capitalist notions—shared by a good many writers, directors and actors in Hollywood in the late 1940s—and the modern, mass technologies of film and, increasingly, television, was a phenomenon pregnant with dangers that the authorities felt they had to preemptively eliminate. The parallels with the present situation, and the mounting drive to censor the internet, should be evident.

After noting that CP leaders were convicted under the reactionary Smith Act in 1949, Bernstein notes the "irony": "the Party had justified the Smith Act when it had been used during the war against the Socialist Workers Party, a Trotskyist group protesting the war."

Bernstein's description of the atmosphere that prevailed during the height of the Red Scare is worth citing: "The air turned smelly and

poisonous. Both the Senate and the House of Representatives now had committees in full cry, hunting down Reds, pinkos and other affronts to the social order. A pliant press decried their methods but supported their aims, and rarely questioned their right to prosecute for political association."

He recalls the scene at a bar near New York's Grand Central Station where television personnel would gather. Some of them now "moved away when I came in or turned their backs, trying to make the movement natural or imperceptible. They were nice people who did not want to hurt my feelings. Not all did that, of course, not actors or costume designers or art directors; the fear seemed restricted to executives. It was one of their perks."

The real effect of the anti-communist purges, Bernstein asserts, was "intimidation." Newspaper editors "did not take seriously the idea that Communists had infiltrated the media; they knew better. What they did take seriously was the government. Federal regulations could hurt them. Federal prosecution could damage them badly. They did not want to cross the powerful Hoover and his FBI and they did not want to be investigated by any congressional committee. They wanted to be left alone to make money. If a condition of that was a blacklist, the price was trifling."

In *Inside Out*, Bernstein relates one incident, involving actor James Dean, that reveals a good deal about Hollywood morality. In April 1952, after initially refusing to "name names" to the witch-hunting House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), prominent theater and film director Elia Kazan turned informer before the Committee and identified eight former Group Theatre members who he said had been Communists.

Bernstein writes that he and Ritt met Dean on the street one day, "and the talk inevitably turned to Kazan and his testimony. Dean was contemptuous and vowed never to work with him. Then he did *East of Eden*, directed by Kazan. Shortly after that, we saw Dean again on the street. He came up to us and spoke without slackening his stride. 'He made me a star,' he said, and walked on."

Bernstein left the CP in 1956, following Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin and the crushing of the Hungarian Revolution by Soviet forces. To his credit, like his friend and colleague director Abraham Polonsky, Bernstein did not turn to the right, although he certainly never found his way to Marxism. He writes in his book that following his departure from the Stalinist party, "I reread those writings of Marx that had stirred me the most, looking, I suppose, to bolster my faith, and found they held the same powerful truths for me. I had left the Party but not the idea of socialism, the possibility that there could be a system not based on inequality and exploitation."

At the time of the disgraceful decision in 1999 by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to bestow an honorary award on Kazan, we interviewed Bernstein, along with director Polonsky. We re-post below the February 1999 interview with Bernstein.

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David Walsh: What is your reaction to the Academy's decision?

Walter Bernstein: It's the same as it has always been, I don't think they should give Kazan an award. It's true, it's been a long time, but this was a man who damaged the industry that is now giving him the award.

DW: It's a lifetime achievement. Turning informer was a pretty critical element of his lifetime achievement.

WB: Yes, I think so. Even without that, I don't think you can separate the two. He was called to testify as this prominent director. That's what he testified as. He hurt a lot of people.

DW: Did he play a major role in legitimizing the witch hunt?

WB: I don't know how major, you know, he was a feather in their cap, in that he was the hottest theater and film director in the country at the time. He had directed *Death of a Salesman*, *Streetcar*, he won an Oscar for *Gentleman's Agreement*. So he represented quite a triumph for them.

DW: Was he the most prestigious director that testified?

WB: I think so, probably.

DW: What was the immediate impact of his action, if any?

WB: I think he was condemned certainly by people in the theater and people who had worked with him. And there was a lot of surprise at what he did, because it wasn't a case of someone, say, who could only have worked in Hollywood and who informed to keep working. Kazan could have worked in the theater, he could have worked in Europe.

DW: He gave a variety of reasons, of course—

WB: Oh, I never believed any of them.

DW: Is there any doubt that he did it simply to save his career?

WB: He's a very complex fellow.

DW: Do you think he believes there was some other reason?

WB: I don't know what he believes. If you read his autobiography, here's a guy with a chip on his shoulder, very defensive. I think a big influence on him was his agency, the William Morris Agency, and his wife, who was much more right-wing than he was. I'm sure he justified it to himself in some way.

DW: What did you think of him personally?

WB: I was working for him at the time. I was writing a play for him. I thought he was wonderful. A very charismatic, enormously seductive man. And I thought he was just great. As a matter of fact, just a month before he testified I brought him down to meet some National Maritime Union guys who I had known, who were very left-wing. We spent an afternoon talking to them, drinking. And afterward, he told me, "Those are the people I believe in—that's the side I'm on," and a month later he testified.

DW: What did he say about politics in those days, before he testified?

WB: We never talked politics very much.

DW: You just assumed he was just generally left-wing?

WB: Yeah, generally, I never thought he was a Communist or anything like that. Generally, he was of the left. And *he* still thought so.

DW: What ever happened to the play you were writing?

WB: That was the end of that.

DW: Have you ever spoken to him since?

WB: No, no.

DW: Or had the desire to?

WB: No, never. As a matter of fact, a couple of months ago a friend of mine, who also became a friend of his, was with him and somehow my name came up. He was very friendly and sent me a copy of his book via this other fellow.

DW: In his autobiography, he says, "I am a person revealed to be interested only in what most artists are interested in, himself." Do you think that the best artists are only interested in themselves?

WB: No, of course not. The best artists are interested in the world as reflected obviously through themselves. That they have big egos, yes.

DW: Which is a different question.

WB: Exactly.

DW: Do you think it's a fair summation of his own outlook?

WB: Yes, I think probably it is.

DW: Do you think his films stand up?

WB: I always thought he was a better stage director than a film director.

DW: Is it possible to see his films without taking into account his behavior?

WB: It depends on the film. I can't see *On the Waterfront* as anything except an apology for his stoolpigeoning.

DW: I was reading Brando's autobiography, and he says that he had no idea that that was the theme or purpose of that film.

WB: I'm sure he didn't.

DW: He seems like an honest guy.

WB: I'm sure Marlon didn't. I'm not that crazy about Kazan's films. I liked *Streetcar* better as a stage play. *Zapata* was kind of a screwed up movie. He's gifted, I think he's a very gifted director. He was a very

gifted actor.

DW: Do you think his behavior manifested itself somehow in his later films?

WB: That's always hard to say. He became a writer. He wrote a number of not very good novels. I remember Marty Ritt saying that he started writing the kind of novels that he would have sneered at directing.

DW: The other question that arises is: why is the Academy doing this now?

WB: That's an interesting question, and I don't know the answer to it. I know that Karl Malden has been pushing for it for a long time. I think that there was a general feeling of: "Okay, enough already, he's old, he's not well." Then there's also the political climate, which I think is on the right today.

DW: Because it does seem there was a natural revulsion against what he did at the time. A rightward shift in certain layers has now produced a change.

WB: I think that's true. It's interesting because I'm going tomorrow to do a little television interview for the BBC on Kazan. And in talking to the guy on the phone about it, he said he's been surprised, among the people he's been talking to, that there is a feeling of acquiescence, that there aren't many people who are against it.

DW: Do you know if there's going to be any protest?

WB: Somebody told me, in fact, I was speaking to somebody in California yesterday, and they said there was going to be some kind of demonstration outside the award ceremony. I don't know how extensive it will be.