

Moving exhibition depicting devastation of Hollywood blacklist opens as television and film strike continues

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Blacklist: The Hollywood Red Scare, Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles California, May 4 to September 3, 2023.

Two days after 11,500 film and television writers represented by the Writers Guild of America (WGA) began picketing the media conglomerates that control the major studios and production companies, an exhibition tracing the evolution of the anti-Communist blacklist of Hollywood writers, directors and actors opened at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles.

There is a profound connection between the two events, both of which arose from the irrepressible conflict between the fundamental interests of writers and other creators of content, on the one hand, and the greed of the financial apparatus to which they are compelled to sell their efforts under capitalism, on the other.

On loan from the Jewish Museum Milwaukee, *Blacklist: The Hollywood Red Scare* focuses on 1947, the year that eight writers, one producer and a director were hauled before the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC), harangued and then blacklisted for refusing to name alleged Communists. It also treats the consequences, through the eventual unraveling of the blacklist, epitomized by Dalton Trumbo's public identification as the writer of the 1960 blockbuster *Spartacus*.

The history of ten creative artists being stripped of their livelihoods and then imprisoned for standing up to bullying, bigoted politicians and their sniveling Hollywood accomplices, as well as the victimization of hundreds of others, is laid out chronologically through artifacts, placards, photographs and multiple film clips.

Setting the mood for what follows, the opening display shows 18 front pages of the witch-hunting *Hollywood Reporter*, blaring headlines such as "Many Reds Named to Committee," "Full Industry Aid In Red Probe," "Film Industry to Ban All Reds," and, referring to the Screen Writers Guild, one of the WGA's predecessors, "SWG Elects Anti-Red Officers."

Background exhibits explain how HUAC, despite being initially formed to monitor the growing fascist influence in the United States after Hitler took power in Germany, in 1938 turned its focus on socialists fighting for the working class, including in the entertainment industries.

That was a period during which, despite the crimes of Stalinism, the brutal purges and frame-up Moscow trials of the Bolshevik leadership of the October Revolution, many writers, actors and directors, radicalized by the Great Depression, were drawn to the Communist Party, which portrayed itself as heir to the 1917 Revolution, fighters for the working class and opponents of the pervasive racial

segregation and oppression embraced openly by the Democratic Party.

With the United States' entry into World War II and its alliance with the Soviet Union, however, the government's and Communist Party's interests coincided in the war against Hitler, epitomized at the exhibition by the display of the original screenplay and poster for 1943's *Mission To Moscow*, written by Howard Koch, a deplorable film directed by Michael Curtiz that painted Joseph Stalin and his bureaucracy in a benign light, and explicitly justified the Moscow Trials.

The upsurge in the class struggle that followed the end of the world war led to a realignment of political forces, including a sharp turn by US imperialism against the Soviet Union abroad and the Communist Party at home.

In 1947 HUAC initiated an investigation into supposed Communist propaganda within the film industry, issuing 43 subpoenas, naming both "friendly" and "unfriendly" witnesses. The "Hollywood Ten" were the unfriendly witnesses who refused to answer questions concerning membership and associates in the Communist Party.

Besides Trumbo, whose original subpoena is on display, the Ten included writers Alvah Bessie, Herbert Biberman, Lester Cole, Ring Lardner, Jr., John Howard Lawson, Albert Maltz and Samuel Ornitz, producer Adrian Scott, and director Edward Dmytryk.

Each of the Ten had, in fact, been a member of the Communist Party. Three writers, Lawson, Cole and Ornitz, were founders of the SWG in 1933. None had a war record that could prove embarrassing to the Committee, although most had worked on pro-war films.

The exhibition has film clips showing how each was shouted down by HUAC interrogators while trying to make a statement in defense of the constitutional right to freedom of political association. None was shown to have committed any crime, or even any so-called "subversive" act aside from refusing to respond to the question, "Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?"

All were cited for contempt of Congress and prosecuted. Each was convicted, sentenced to a year in prison and fined \$1,000. All served time.

The exhibition also depicts the "friendly" witnesses, including Walt Disney, who made clear that his anti-Communism was linked directly to the demands of workers.

In response to a HUAC question about the 1941 animators' strike that stopped production of cartoons absent a contract with the Screen Cartoonist's Guild, Disney said, "I definitely feel it was a Communist group trying to take over my artists and they did take them over." He added, "The thing that I resent the most is that they are able to get into

these unions, take them over, and represent to the world that a group of people that are in my plant, that I know are good, 100 per cent Americans, are trapped by this group.”

Other notorious “friendly witnesses” included studio heads Louis B. Mayer and Jack Warner—both of whom trumpeted their willingness to throw creative talent under the bus—and actors Gary Cooper, Adolphe Menjou and Ronald Reagan, the last of whom would ride his anti-Communism to the governorship of California and presidency of the United States.

The immediate consequences of the one-sided HUAC hearings are well depicted. “The Committee for the First Amendment,” which included prominent actors such as Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Henry Fonda, Vincent Price and Ava Gardner, and directors John Huston, Billy Wilder and William Wyler, among many other leading Hollywood figures, petitioned the Committee and appeared outside the Capitol in protest of the “smear” of the motion picture industry, declaring, “Any investigation into the political beliefs of the individual is contrary to the basic principles of our democracy.”

Immediately the Ten’s supporters came under intense fire as “red sympathizers.” They suddenly found themselves frozen out of roles or unable to secure financing for projects. Their retreat was epitomized by Bogart’s pathetic climb-down in his March 1948 Photoplay editorial titled, “I’m No Communist.”

The exhibition documents the response of the studio executives, then among the wealthiest and most powerful people in the United States, who met in secret on November 24 and 25, 1947, at the Waldorf Astoria in New York City. The result was the noxious “Waldorf Statement,” in which they “deplore the action of the 10 Hollywood men who have been cited for contempt by the House of Representatives,” and vow to “discharge or suspend without compensation those in our employ,” and “not re-employ any of the 10 until such time as he is acquitted or has purged himself of contempt and declares under oath that he is not a Communist.”

The exhibition documents how the HUAC hearings and Waldorf statement triggered exponential growth of the Hollywood Blacklist, which listed, by one tabulation, 106 writers, 36 actors, 11 directors, 4 producers and 57 other performers and professionals. There was also a “greylist” that included hundreds more, many identified in the despicable *Red Channels*, which billed itself as “The Newsletter of Facts To Combat Communism.”

Betrayed and abandoned, the Ten’s last shot to avoid federal prison ended in April 1950 when the Supreme Court refused to review the constitutionality of their convictions. Each served between four and ten months. After his release, director Edward Dmytryk testified before HUAC, naming 22 alleged Communist Party members. None of the others recanted, however, costing them considerable income and opportunities.

Artifacts on display include scripts, correspondence, legal papers, typewriters and both Oscar statuettes that were unwittingly awarded to scripts authored by Trumbo during the depth of the blacklist, the first for *Roman Holiday* to a “front,” Ian McLellan Hunter, at the 1954 Academy Awards ceremony, and the second in 1957 for *The Brave One*, to a fictitious Robert Rich. That statuette remained unclaimed until 1975, when it was delivered to Trumbo, who was confined to a nursing home one year from death.

The exhibition was assembled and displayed by Jewish cultural museums, and pays special and legitimate attention to the high percentage of Hollywood figures, from studio heads on down, of Jewish descent, including six of the Ten. The witch-hunt had many

anti-Semitic overtones, especially emanating from John Rankin, a sixteen-term Democrat from Mississippi, one of the most aggressive HUAC inquisitors, an openly racist and anti-Semitic defender of the Ku Klux Klan.

The exhibition includes a display dedicated to the exceptional actor Canada Lee, an African American who passed away in 1952 at the age of 45, supposedly of a heart attack, shortly before his scheduled appearance before HUAC. The adjacent display portrays Paul Robeson, the former All-American football star, who became a noted actor and the singer for whom Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II wrote “Old Man River” decades before.

The exhibition highlights Jose Ferrer, the first actor of Puerto Rican decent to win an Oscar. His starring role as French impressionist painter Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec in John Huston’s 1952 film *Moulin Rouge* was picketed by the American Legion because of Ferrer’s 1947 opposition to HUAC. Ferrer responded not only by denouncing Communism generally but also Robeson in particular, with whom he appeared on Broadway in *Othello*.

The exhibition notes that the “impact on the gay and lesbian community during this period is hard to quantify” because most “were closeted and feared being outed.” As an example, the exhibition points to Jerome Robbins, who choreographed *West Side Story*. According to the display, Robbins “named names in front of HUAC,” out of fear that his sexual orientation would be exposed, along with his own earlier political affiliations.

Although the blacklist eventually ran its course, the human costs were incalculable. One of the final placards, entitled “Premature Death,” lists Canada Lee along with ten others who died young, including the prominent actor John Garfield.

The writers walking picket lines a few freeway exits away from the Skirball Center are facing the same reactionary economic and political forces, which are supported more or less openly by their union leadership, that aligned against the Hollywood Ten 75 years ago.



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