

Norman Jewison (*The Russians Are Coming...*, *In the Heat of the Night*), popular filmmaker of the 1960s and 1970s, dies at 97

David Walsh
28 January 2024

Canadian film director Norman Jewison died January 20 at the age of 97. His film career, during most of which he was a successful figure in Hollywood, lasted from 1962 (*40 Pounds of Trouble*) until 2003 (*The Statement*). He was most prominent in the 1960s, '70s and '80s.

Jewison is identified with liberal views, including concerns about bigotry and various forms of social injustice. Among the two dozen feature films he directed, three of them, *In the Heat of the Night* (1967), *A Soldier's Story* (1984) and *The Hurricane* (1999), centered on racism in the US.

As a popular filmmaker in the 1960s, Jewison directed in rapid succession two Doris Day comedies, *The Thrill of It All* (1963) and *Send Me No Flowers* (1964); a film about tense, high-stakes gambling, *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965, with Steve McQueen and Edward G. Robinson); the Cold War paranoia satire *The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming* (1966); *In the Heat of the Night* and *The Thomas Crown Affair* (1968), about a millionaire businessman-thief.

Jewison developed a reputation with the studios for efficiency and productivity, as well as for turning out films that appealed to a broad audience. As a result, he was much sought after and could choose many of his own projects. In the 1970s, he directed an eclectic mix of films, including the hugely successful *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971, based on the Broadway musical adaptation of Sholem Aleichem stories); *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973, also a musical, from the Tim Rice-Andrew Lloyd Webber rock opera); *Rollerball* (1975, a dystopian sports science fiction work); *F.I.S.T.* (1978, loosely based on the life and career of Teamsters' leader Jimmy Hoffa, with Sylvester Stallone) and the courtroom drama-comedy with Al Pacino, *...And Justice For All* (1979).

By the 1980s, Jewison's genre of socially conscious filmmaking was already falling out of fashion, but he still reached audiences with *A Soldier's Story* (1984, set in a racially segregated US army unit stationed in the Jim Crow South) and *Moonstruck* (1987, with Cher and Nicolas Cage, about a widowed Italian-American woman in Brooklyn who falls in love with her fiancé's brother). Jewison's final film to make a significant impact on audiences was *The Hurricane* (1999, with Denzel Washington as persecuted boxer Rubin "Hurricane" Carter).

Jewison grew up during the Depression in the Beaches neighborhood in Toronto, to parents who ran a small dry goods store. In his entertaining autobiography, *This Terrible Business Has Been Good to Me* (2004), Jewison recounts that the Beaches

was a working-class area, friendly and quiet but tough, politically left. I remember communist meetings by the boardwalk, near the lake, on hot summer evenings with the moths swarming around the streetlights and young men making passionate speeches

about the threat of fascism and the Spanish Civil War.

Jewison also grew up literate. He had an aunt who

insisted I practice piano and read Dickens and Sir Walter Scott. She was as unswerving in her belief in my ability to succeed as she was in her Methodist faith. ... Bea loved English literature and the New Testament in equal measure. At age ninety-two she could still recite [Thomas] Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* [1750] without a pause or hesitation. And I, some seven decades after her insistence that I memorize long passages from the New Testament, can still recite most of her favorite psalms.

After serving briefly in the Canadian Navy in the final days of World War II, he visited relatives in the US and made a tour of the South. Experiences there with Jim Crow left a strong impression on him. He writes in his memoir that it was then

along the highways of Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana that the desire to make films such as *In the Heat of the Night* and *A Soldier's Story* took root. It was still with me when I made *The Hurricane* about Hurricane Carter, a black man wrongly convicted of murder. I have always wanted to tell stories that grab an audience, stories that hold your attention. But what really fascinates me are the ideas behind the stories. Racism and injustice are two themes I have come back to, again and again, in my films.

Jewison, on the advice of a friend, traveled to England and found work with the BBC, in television and radio. In 1952, he returned to Canada and was present as an assistant director when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation went on the air for the first time that September. Five years later, after directing hundreds of episodes of mostly variety shows and musical programs, Jewison was recruited to work for CBS in New York.

He produced and directed numerous specials for CBS, including

for Danny Kaye, Jimmy Durante, and Jackie Gleason. Then *The Broadway of Lerner and Loewe*, when I had the opportunity to work with Richard Burton, Stanley Holloway, Julie Andrews, and

Maurice Chevalier. And then came *Tonight with [Harry] Belafonte*, the first special on American television starring a black performer.

An opportunity that proved significant arrived when Jewison directed singer Judy Garland in a 1961 special, also with Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin, which led to Garland's weekly television show. During rehearsals for the Garland special, a visiting Tony Curtis suggested to Jewison that he direct films. This led to his being hired to direct *40 Pounds of Trouble* for Curtis' and wife Janet Leigh's film production company.

Jewison subsequently signed a two-picture deal with Universal-International Pictures, which resulted in the Doris Day films. With *The Cincinnati Kid* in 1965, Jewison considered that he began to make films that meant something to him. *The Russians Are Coming, The Russians Are Coming* in 1966 was a further success, and earned him an invitation to visit Moscow and attend a screening of the film at the Soviet Filmmakers Union, which proved to be a great success.

In Moscow,

I realized then that the film, although made primarily for an American audience, expressed the hopes and fears felt by people in both countries at that period in the Cold War. What the Russians of course couldn't believe, and were blown away by, was the fact that I had been allowed to make the film at all. [Vladimir] Posner informed me the next day that I was now considered a friend of the Soviet Union.

With *In the Heat of the Night*, a study of racism in the small-town Deep South (with Rod Steiger and Sidney Poitier), Jewison consolidated his reputation as a socially critical filmmaker *and* a source of box office hits.

Jewison's autobiography, written after he directed his final film, is revealing for what it indicates about changes in the film industry. The films he made, good, bad or indifferent, possessing varying degrees of depth and insight, were approved by the heads of studios with relatively little fuss. The budgets were dramatically lower than they are today, even when inflation is taken into account. The subject matter was relatively adult and not considered to be oriented toward a "niche," "prestige" audience. This was mainstream material.

Jewison was one of a number of Canadian directors, most of them veterans of the CBC, who went to work in US film and television in the 1950s, '60s and beyond, including Sidney J. Furie (*The Ipcress File*), Arthur Hiller (*The Americanization of Emily*), Ted Kotcheff (*Fun With Dick and Jane*), Darryl Duke (*The Silent Partner*), Harvey Hart (*The Sweet Ride*) and Silvio Narizzano (*Georgy Girl*). In his *The American Cinema* (1968), critic Andrew Sarris commented that, as a group, they "seem stronger on technique than personality."

Jewison, along with Kotcheff perhaps, had more personality and substance than the others.

In his autobiography, he observes that he was drawn to direct *Rollerball* because it

was about sponsored violence, and it was about a corporate society—the way the world would sacrifice the rights of individuals for corporate goals of profit. The multinational corporations, even then, before Enron and Worldcom, recognized no boundaries and no states. They operated above or beyond the law, much like they do today.

He recalls that most of the families on his street growing up

were on relief, and everyone was deeply suspicious of the wealthy elite who lived in the large homes on Glen Manor Drive, or in Rosedale and Forest Hill. Later, like many of my street-smart friends, I was attracted to the ideas of George Bernard Shaw, Bertrand Russell, Norman Thomas, even Karl Marx. They were much more interesting and passionate than the stuffy Canadian establishment politics of Mackenzie King and R.B. Bennett. ...

Jewison continues

One thing I've always been sure of is that I'm on the side of the working stiff and against the owners of the company store. I have always rebelled against authority—though the Navy knocked out some of my early rebelliousness. It did not, however, change my way of thinking. ...

The whole idea of a class struggle, the excitement of worker solidarity against the oppression of capitalism, captured my imagination. No matter how naive or unsophisticated I was in 1948, these ideas influenced me in one way or another for the rest of my life.

He adds that

I have always felt that culture or the arts were pitted against commerce, that artists are often exploited and used by the networks and major studios.

There is a noticeable discrepancy between the relatively strong language Jewison uses in his memoir and the rather limited and even conventional results, no matter that they seemed "controversial" at the time.

Commenting on *The Hurricane*, the WSWS reviewer noted

Norman Jewison is known for directing films dealing with controversial subjects, with injustice and racism in particular (*In the Heat of the Night*, *A Soldier's Story*, ... *And Justice for All* are several of the works he has directed). But as in his earlier films, there is a tendency in *The Hurricane* toward sentimentality: to wrap everything up in a neat package so it all comes out right in the end.

The apparatus of the for-profit film industry, even at a time when studios were less likely to be mere component parts of conglomerates, certainly got in the way of more challenging efforts. What often begin as more hard-hitting projects, through the various stages leading to ultimate production, are often diluted, watered down and may be rendered almost unrecognizable.

Moreover, and this is also bound up with the times, Jewison's idea of leftism never went much beyond the confines of social democracy in Canada, one of the most toothless and ineffectual social democracies on the planet, and figures like Robert Kennedy in the US. His filmmaking too shows unmistakable signs of the limits of this world view and of the overall political-cultural atmosphere.

Nonetheless, at its best, Jewison's film work displays a decency and honesty, and a genuine sympathy for those who are suffering. It seems likely some of the films will endure.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact