

The Writer's Guild and Me

Thanks to Jack Webb's inviting me to write for *Dragnet*, I became a proud member of the WGA back in the late 60s, but the honeymoon came to an unseemly end at a strike meeting a few years later. Because the Guild had decided to try dividing the opposition by allowing independent production companies to keep their doors open during the strike, so long as they agreed to abide retroactively by the final contract, I, who was then employed by Talent Associates, found myself in the odd position of crossing a picket line in the morning and leaving my office to carry a picket sign from 3-4 in the afternoon.



At the strike meeting, someone had suggested that because a number of us would be gainfully employed for the duration of the work stoppage, we should have to kick in an additional 3% to the strike fund. That seemed fair to me, so I raised my hand along with just about everyone else.

Then another writer suggested that because the networks would be using re-runs in order to keep product on the air, the same 3% levy should be placed on residual payments. That seemed an equally fair notion. This time, however, when I raised my hand, I found I was one of very few.

That was my initial wake-up call. The second occurred during a strike meeting in the 80s, when our negotiating committee

reported that we had come to terms on DVDs. We were agreeing to accept 1.2% of producer's gross. Oh, and by the way, it would pertain only to movies produced after 1971.

When I saw Julius Epstein trudging up the aisle, it dawned on me that the Guild had just screwed him out of *Casablanca*, not to mention dozens of other Warner Brothers classics of the 30s, 40s, 50s and 60s, that he'd co-scripted with his late brother, Phil.

Why, I wondered, hadn't the Guild settled for, say, just 1% of producers gross, but insisted that the deal cover every movie going back to *The Great Train Robbery*?

The answer, of course, was that once again the members of the Guild had decided to cannibalize its own. After all, most of the members wrote TV, not movies. And even among those who wrote screenplays, most of them hadn't even been in the Guild prior to 1971.

The next time the Guild showed its true colors, which mainly consist of various shades of yellow, I was a member of the Board of Directors. I was in the final few months of my second two-year term when a couple of lawyers showed up at a Board meeting. They were seeking a donation for legal expenses, along with a request that we lend our moral support by signing an amicus curiae brief.

The case involved an art gallery exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's pornographic efforts. Mapplethorpe, in case his name doesn't register, was a homosexual photographer whose artistic vision required full-frontal nudity of pre-pubescent children.

When the director of Cincinnati's Contemporary Arts Center displayed the traveling exhibit, Mapplethorpe's "The Perfect Moment," the city shut it down. (Predictably, the exhibit was funded with American tax dollars, courtesy of the National Endowment of the Arts.) That, in turn, led to the lawyers

coming west, hat in hand.

Because the Board of Directors was authorized to spend up to \$5,000 of Guild funds without requiring a vote of the membership, we were often approached by lawyers involved in censorship cases. Needless to say, they usually got it. Just like the politicians in Washington, we found it not only easy, but morally uplifting, to spend other people's money.

Sen. Jesse Helms (R, S.C.) had already gone on record to state that he found Mapplethorpe's work reprehensible, and urging that no additional tax dollars be allocated to the NEA.

Although, over the previous few years, I had gotten along well with most of my fellow Board members, who included David Rintels, Carl Gottlieb, Hal Kantor, George Kirgo, Ollie Crawford and Jean Butler, I was aware that I was definitely in the minority when I rose to voice my objections.

I argued that, one, Mapplethorpe was a pornographer; two that in a country with well over 250 million people, no "artist" should have to be supported with tax dollars. If people didn't wish to buy what you were selling, it wasn't a subsidy you needed, it was vocational guidance. And, three, that we had a fiduciary responsibility not to squander the money of our fellow WGA members in such a morally questionable manner, and that, furthermore, community standards trumped what a bunch of Hollywood writers 2,000 miles away thought.

I was prepared to be out-voted. After all, a fair number of my fellow Board members had been blacklisted in the 50s and still believed that this gave them a moral authority denied to mere mortals. But I guess I wasn't prepared to be out-voted 18-1. I also wasn't prepared for the way they reacted. Initially, it was shock and dismay that someone in their midst was agreeing with a reactionary Southern senator, but it soon became clear that they refused to even pay attention to what I was saying. They had that quickly decided that if Sen. Helms was on one

side of the issue, they had no option but to be on the other side. At one point, during my brief remarks, I recall feeling like Jimmy Stewart in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, wondering if I should drop a heavy book on the floor to get their attention, just to make sure they still had faces.

In the intervening years, I have taken very little part in Guild activities. But that doesn't mean that the Guild hasn't continued to annoy me.

For one thing, there are the constant homages offered up to the victims of the Hollywood blacklist. What's fascinating about the adoration of the handful of writers who were sent underground for a few years 60 years ago is that if those who were despised as squealers, condemned for naming names, people like Elia Kazan, Larry Parks, Lee J. Cobb, Robert Taylor and Budd Schulberg, had been ratting out fascists instead of communists, Hollywood's liberals would have hailed them as patriots and erected statues in their honor at the corner of Hollywood and Vine.

What's ironic and pathetic is that the very same people who utter the names of Dalton Trumbo, Albert Maltz, John Howard Lawson and the rest of the Hollywood 10 with the same reverence that some people extend to Jesus and his disciples, not only choose to ignore the blacklisting of older scriptwriters and directors, but make it a practice, as reported in Ben Shapiro's *Primetime Propaganda*, to bad-mouth their conservative colleagues every chance they get.

It is no accident, after all, that the WGA's slick monthly, *Written By*, has never published an article about the decade-long ageism class action lawsuit that culminated earlier this year in a \$70 million settlement by studios, networks and agencies, just as there will never be an article about the widespread practice of blacklisting those on the Right.

The dirty little secret of the Writers Guild is that those who

are most responsible for blacklisting over the past six decades are its very own writer-producer members.

Recently, I sent an email to Richard Stayton, editor of *Written By*, to point out that in a recent issue of the monthly there had been 26 photos of members, and not one of them was over the age of 50. When taken together with the fact that nothing had ever been written about the ageism suit, I suggested that this displayed an obvious bias against older writers.

Inasmuch as writing scripts, unlike, say, playing centerfield for the Yankees, doesn't require young eyes or young legs, it suggested that even after the lawsuit, nothing had changed in terms of employment or perception of veteran writers. I felt that the magazine should devote at least some of its attention to a problem that affects a large number of its current members and will, God willing, eventually plague them all.

It seemed a better use of the magazine than devoting yet another article to some thirty-year-old who insisted, with a straight face, that it was his passion that led him to write *Nightmare on Elm Street: The Blight That Wouldn't Die, Part XXIV*, and not his mortgage.

Within the hour, Stayton informed me that my letter would not run.

Frankly, I wasn't too surprised to find that if you're 71, you can't even get a letter published by the WGA.

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