

## ... and director Abraham Polonsky

By David Walsh  
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Abraham Polonsky was born in New York City in 1910. He attended the City College of New York and Columbia Law School. He practiced law, taught at CCNY, wrote radio scripts and several novels, and signed a contract with Paramount before leaving for the Second World War, during which he worked with the OSS. After the war his first screenwriting job was on Mitchell Leisen's *Golden Earring*; none of his material survived to the final script. His next job was on Robert Rossen's *Body and Soul* (1947), a boxing drama with John Garfield. He was encouraged by Garfield to direct the actor's next picture, *Force of Evil* (1948). In April 1951 he was subpoenaed to appear before HUAC, and after refusing to cooperate, was blacklisted by the industry. He could not use his own name in credits until *Madigan*, for which he wrote the script, in 1968. He directed two more films, *Tell Them Willie Boy Is Here* (1970) and *Romance of a Horsethief* (1971).

**DW:** What is your response to the Kazan award?

**AP:** He's a member of the Benedict Arnold society, and he got the memorial award for "kiss and tell." What more do you have to know?

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

**AP:** All he did was play a legitimate role in his own advancement. And in betraying his personal friends, which was kind of sweet. At least it shows that he's not against the United States, he's only against friendship.

**DW:** Wasn't he one of the more prestigious people who talked?

**AP:** Oh, yeah. But a lot of prestigious people talked, as well as a lot of people who weren't so prestigious. But what's the difference? Who cares about him? I don't really care about him. I'm really surprised at the Academy.

**DW:** Why are they doing this?

**AP:** Someone talked them into it. They're boobs anyhow, what do you think? We ought to give

everybody an Academy Award. That's what I say. The Academy has now become the legitimizing organization for double-crossers.

**DW:** Did he do it to save his career?

**AP:** No, I think he did it because he's a creep. He didn't have to save his career, his career was made, and he could have directed on Broadway all he liked.

**DW:** So why did he do it?

**AP:** Did you read his autobiography?

**DW:** Yes.

**AP:** So how could you ask?

**DW:** But he gives about six different reasons.

**AP:** He rejoices in the fact that he betrayed his family, his wife, his friends, what more do you need?

**DW:** He says in the book that artists are only interested in themselves. Is that true of the best artists?

**AP:** *Au contraire*. The opposite is true. Art is not about nothing. It's about an interpretation of the world around you, right? And your understanding of it. People say that, after all, he's a great artist, all he did was betray his friends, what's the big deal? They say all artists are bad characters. Yeah, but their bad character consists of doing what the president did, not keeping his pants buttoned--not betraying their friends.

**DW:** There's a big difference.

**AP:** If they can't see the difference ...

**DW:** Do you think it's possible to look at his films without thinking about what he did?

**AP:** Well, most people don't know what he did. This is a whole generation in America which has been brought up without studying history. They're as ignorant as hell.

**DW:** What do you think about his films?

**AP:** Everybody says they're wonderful, right?

**DW:** No, not everybody.

**AP:** Who criticizes them?

**DW:** Andrew Sarris, Manny Farber, I do, other people.

**AP:** Good. That means that maybe we can get rid of him without creating a crisis in the world of art.

**DW:** I think it's possible.

**AP:** Well, good, let's do it. It's a good opportunity. If we could get rid of the Academy too, it would be marvelous.

**DW:** The Academy is setting up the artist as informer as a model. That can't be very healthy.

**AP:** It is very healthy. Because in that way everybody can be a founding member of the Benedict Arnold Society.

**DW:** No, thanks, not me.

**AP:** Not you?

**DW:** Not you either.

**AP:** I'm the one who created the organization. I didn't join though. In the world I came from, in the streets I came from, if he did that on the East Side where I come from, he'd be floating on his way to Samarkand by now.

**DW:** Samarkand, specifically? Do you know if there's going to be a protest?

**AP:** Well, I got a letter from someone saying there was. But, you know, with the disappearance of the radical movement in the United States, as it has, and the disappearance of strong unionism and stuff like that.... In the old ways, if something like this was going on, you'd make a few telephone calls, you'd have a thousand people there. No more. Nobody believes in anything, except in the finance capitalist. It's terrible. Listen, I'll just say one thing more to you, and release you from bondage. Remember Swann in Marcel Proust?

**DW:** Yes.

**AP:** Toward the end of his life he went to a hairdresser, and suddenly he looked in the mirror, and he said, "To think I've spent the best years of my life making love to a woman who wasn't my style." I make the same remark about the film industry. I've spent the best years of my life in an occupation that's not my style. Where I come from we don't do things like that.

I've lived a long life, I'm 88, but I've been annoyed by CBS, NBC, ABC is doing it today, CNN was over here. I've been photographed, they've wasted a lot of camera stuff and everything, and they all ask the same questions. I even had the honor of talking to Charlton Heston. Good old Chuck called. I was talking to some people on the air, I guess, and he called in. Chuck, I

said to him, you're in charge of the guns in the United States, aren't you? I said, why don't you give this guy a gun, he commits suicide on the stage, and he goes down in history. So when he goes to hell he'll have to plenty of company. But he didn't understand it. He may have played Moses, but he didn't listen to what he said. It's awful. But I don't mind, after all, I'm 88. Even if I'm enjoying good health, I can't live too much longer. So to hell with that. But I won't go to the Academy, of course. Why do they think he's such a great director?

**DW:** I just rented 13 videos of his films, and I was not particularly impressed.

**AP:** What's impressive about it? You know what he has? He gets energy out of it. Actors find it very difficult to play around with energy, and a director who can get that out of them is good. Even if he doesn't know what the hell he's talking about, and even if he's on the wrong side. And also there's a theory going around about all artists, that their art is important, but their personal characters are not. *Who creates the art?* If not the personal character. That's what I want to know.

**DW:** And also, as you say, there's a difference between cheating on your wife and turning your friends into the state.

**AP:** That's right, and turning your friends over to death, to starvation. Because when they got jobs even outside the industry the FBI came around and said, so-and-so working for you? They'd say, yeah. And they'd say, we're the FBI. The employer would say, is he a criminal? The FBI would say, no, no, we just want you to let us know when he leaves the job and where's he's going. Well, you know what happens to this fellow the next morning. He lost the job. Who needs anyone like that around? So the blacklist functioned economically too. Of course J. Edgar Hoover was very busy at this stage, he used to change from his dressing gown into the dress he was wearing that day at the office. You remember him? What a world! Listen, don't lose hope.

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