

Ideas & Trends

The Blacklist Era Won't Fade to Black

By BERNARD WEINRAUB

THE blacklist still torments Hollywood.

Even now, 50 years after many of the victims and accusers of the Hollywood blacklist have died, the movie industry is struggling to make amends for the McCarthy era, when studios, unions, stars, film makers and, it seems, almost everyone crumbled before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and its investigations of Communist influence.

Last week the Writers Guild of America, one of several Hollywood unions that failed to support members blacklisted in the

**Hollywood condemns
a time of scoundrels,
50 years too late.**

1950's, announced that it was restoring the credits on 23 films written by blacklisted screenwriters. The screenplays were done under pseudonyms or by "fronts," relatives or friends whose names were used as covers for those accused of Communist sympathies in a country riven by witch hunts and cold-war hysteria.

Six months ago, the guild restored the credits on 24 other films. A spokeswoman said the process of restoring credits would continue — and focus now on television comedies and dramas written in the 1950's

and 1960's by blacklisted writers.

As the announcements were made, the unions here representing, among others, directors and actors as well as writers, were preparing for a 50th-anniversary observance of the blacklist era this month at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences — to commemorate what the organizers called "this aberrant chapter of American history."

In that chapter Hollywood studios demanded that writers, actors and others cooperate with the House panel and reveal names of Communists and Communist sympathizers. Those who refused were fired. Victims included those who may have flirted with Communism in their youth, or signed petitions considered too left-wing. Careers — and lives — were destroyed.

"They scattered all over," said Bernard Gordon, a 78-year-old screenwriter, who has now been given credit for several films he wrote using pseudonyms or fronts, including "Chicago Confidential." "They went to London or Paris or Mexico to find work. Some succeeded, some didn't. Some started to sell insurance and became salesmen. It was not a happy time."

What's surprising about all this renewed activity is that Hollywood disregards — and forgives — some of the most appalling behavior, on the part of stars and moguls alike. At the same time, Hollywood likes to congratulate itself on its liberalism. Condemning the blacklist today is a safe cause, like boycotting grapes two decades ago, that producers, studio executives and agents can easily support.

Yet the blacklist, in which friend betrayed friend, remains one of the darkest episodes in Hollywood's history and simply won't go away. "It's an unfinished piece of business — and every time the issue comes up, it just



The New York Times

Blacklisted Hollywood writers and their attorneys in Washington, January 1948: Top row, from left, Ring Lardner Jr., Edward Dmytryk and Adrian Scott; middle row, Dalton

Trumbo, John Lawson, Alva Bessie and Samuel Ornitz; bottom row, Herbert Biberman, Martin Popper (lawyer), Robert W. Kenny (lawyer), Albert Maltz and Lester Cole.

hangs in the air and needs resolution," said Judy Chaikin, who produced an Emmy-nominated documentary, "Legacy of the Hollywood Blacklist," about the families of those blacklisted. Ms. Chaikin is also producing the 50th-anniversary observance.

"I think people are trying to put some closure to all of this," she said. "It's a very painful and complex legacy. Now you have credits being restored to writers. Apologies are being given. Maybe there's some forgiveness in the air."

Not quite. One of the most enduring symbols of that time was that of Elia Kazan, one of the most acclaimed postwar theater and film directors. Mr. Kazan, who is now 87 and in frail health, is a two-time Academy Award winner who made such movies as "A Streetcar Named Desire," "On the Waterfront" and "East of Eden." In April 1952, he appeared before a House panel and in-

formed on eight friends who had been fellow members of the Communist Party.

Early this year the Los Angeles Film Critics Association, in an angrily divided vote, refused to give Mr. Kazan an honorary award. The American Film Institute has also declined to present its prestigious annual award to him. Mr. Kazan's supporters argued that the director's dazzling artistic achievement merited the awards. Opponents said he was an opportunist who named names to save his career; forgiveness was out of the question.

An Industry That Caved

But Todd McCarthy, chief film critic for Variety, who supported an award for Mr. Kazan, argued that the director's personal choices were not the issue. "If adultery, lack of ethics and professional ruthlessness were

unpardonable sins in Hollywood, precious few awards would ever be given out," Mr. McCarthy said.

In some way Mr. Kazan's behavior was not the issue. Hollywood's behavior was. "People are embarrassed and ashamed because it was a blacklist in which Hollywood caved," said Irwin Winkler, who directed a 1991 film, "Guilty by Suspicion," about blacklisting. "Most everyone stood shoulder to shoulder and covered before the blacklist."

But Mr. Winkler, like others, conceded that it was perhaps too easy now to pass judgment on people in Hollywood 50 years ago. He cited a comment by a character in a John Le Carré novel, "The Russia House," who said that everyone changes their tune when handcuffed to a radiator.

"What would each of us have done when handcuffed to a radiator?" Mr. Winkler said. "Who knows?"