

Last of the Hollywood Blacklistees : Norma Barzman

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A LARGE STORY in American culture has now drawn to a chronological end with the death of sometime screenwriter Norma Barzman, age 103.

Her actual screen credits were few, in part because she left Hollywood for Paris with her better-known husband, Ben Barzman, as McCarthyism made further film work impossible. In part, she wrote later, few women had ever been taken seriously as screenwriters until much later. The writing that she did after the couple returned to Hollywood in the late 1950s never got produced.

Yet Norma played a vital role in the little-understood community of creative screenwriters struggling to find a place for themselves, mostly in Europe during the worst of the Blacklist, but also earlier and later, in Hollywood itself.

It is impossible to describe let alone analyze the Left role in Hollywood's so-called Golden Era briefly, in part because the deeply contradictory relation of cultural activists with the Communist Party. It connected them with unionization efforts and wartime antifascist mobilization, but also bound them to an unwieldy and mostly unfriendly bureaucracy. CP leaders and its cultural commissars never appreciated film art, and allowed for considerable autonomy only because Hollywoodites made large financial contributions. Famously a visiting William Z. Foster, hoping to raise money or perhaps play upon guilt in a 1930s visit, wanted to meet Cowboy stars who were his idea of leading film actors.

A handful of leftwing writers were very successful, indeed among the highest paid writers in Hollywood. Sometimes enough of their work survived into genuinely brilliant films, or at least films with brilliant moments.

The majority scraped along, often writing for B pictures including detective dramas, children's films or even Westerns. Every writer could say that the best writing remained unproduced. Norma and Ben Barzman occupied the second tier, but both showed promise, until 1947 came around, with the end in sight. They fled abroad to France, finding there an artistic-minded, leftish community with famous artists and writers eager to engage "the Americans" socially.

Norma co-wrote a screenplay about a young woman urgently seeking an abortion. Ben, who had scripted a great film in 1949 based upon the Italian-American working-class novel *Christ in Concrete*, by Pietro Di Donato, had mixed success in his career afterward. Joseph Losey, Jules Dassin and a few others found great success, while most had to go behind "Fronts" for U.S. television work or await the reopening of opportunities at home.

My own small world, as belated scholar of the Blacklist, included aging survivors like Walter Bernstein, Abraham Polonsky (known familiarly as the "last Marxist of Hollywood"), Paul Jarrico (who had produced *Salt of the Earth* before departing abroad), sitcom master Frank Tarloff and former Abbott and Costello writer Bobby Lees, among others.

It may be important to say, for the readers of *Against the Current*, that for most of them, faith in the Soviet Union faded early, and that their understanding of how Marxist ideas could be applied to screenwriting never got much beyond the instinctive.

They despised capitalism and the film colony capitalists, they dreamed of a film world guided by working people in every sector of the industry, technicians as much as writers. Some of them, including the Barzmans, grasped at film noir in their bitter disillusionment with the collapse of wartime, antifascist hopes, and with the rightward-moving Democratic Party.

Television series *You Are There* and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*, scripted under pseudonyms, reached many more millions than almost any of their films, a point worth pondering. The Mary Tyler Moore Show and some of Norman Lear's ventures like *Maude*, not to mention the humane kids' programs like *Lassie and Flipper*, owed a lot to their creative efforts.

The writers — rarely allowed to use their own names until near the end of their careers — perhaps touched the consciousness of 1960s-'80s political generations deepest with *Never On Sunday*, *MASH*, *Midnight Cowboy* or *Serpico*, to name a few that survived the studio system and its fragmented successors. Walter Bernstein got *The Front* made only because Woody Allen would star in it.

The "blacklist film," about the history of their persecution, invariably featured someone "innocent" but mistaken for a Red. Perhaps *The Majestic*, starring Jim Carrey, really is the end of the line, appropriately in 2001, fifty years since the Blacklist came slamming down.

But this would be the wrong way of looking at a cultural story of great complexity and value. Some socially critical writers, directors and even (or most likely) stars today get important films made and will continue to do so. "The Left" as a community has never coalesced again in Hollywood or New York, and is unlikely to do, even when political positions are taken at award ceremonies or in acts of real or symbolic solidarity. And yet recent strike action by the "talent guilds" depended upon traditions of solidarity that owed their origins to hard work and sacrifice long ago.

Norma Barzman repeatedly emphasized, in writings and in her memoir, that the community of the Left, wherever she found herself within it, was itself the source of strength and understanding.

They could be wrong about the USSR (as nearly all of them would later admit) but right about capitalism and right about the struggle for creativity and commitment within the commercial cultural of capitalism ongoing. It was, so to speak, their credo.

Nothing less than a deep look at their work that actually achieved a worthy production can bring a sense of their accomplishment, and even that falls short of what, under different circumstances, they might have done. I am happy to have spent a little time with Norma Barzman, more with Abraham Polonsky, Bobby Lees, Walter Bernstein and most of all Ring Lardner, Jr., among others less well known. And to have been, with a handful of colleagues, the historians of their lives and work.

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P.-S.

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