



A Timeless Classic on Hither Lane

9 Hither Lane, East Hampton

Exclusively Listed by Martha Gundersen and Paul Brennan

Douglas Elliman

CONNECT

SHARE



BOOKSHELF

Trumbo in Limbo

The blacklisted Dalton Trumbo was as political as he was prolific. But he didn't blame those who, unlike him, "named names."



Dalton Trumbo refusing to tell the House Committee on Un-American Activities whether he was a Communist, 1947. PHOTO: CORBIS IMAGES

By Edward Kosner

Feb. 6, 2015 3:30 pm ET

SAVE PRINT TEXT

4

Dalton Trumbo is a compellingly odd footnote in the tangled history of politics and show business in America. A Communist screenwriter in 1940s Hollywood, he is the most resonant character in the saga of the blacklist that banished hundreds of Communists and fellow travelers from cushy studio work to a shadowy limbo for nearly a decade.

After defying the House Committee on Un-American Activities, which was investigating Communist influence in the movie industry in 1947, Trumbo went to prison for a year for contempt. For the next 10 years, he eked out a living churning out bootlegged scripts, then emerged triumphant in the 1960s with Oscar recognition for "The Brave One," a screen story he had written as "Robert Rich," and with credits under his own name for "Spartacus" and "Exodus." Over the course of a long career, he was involved in movies ranging from the Ginger Rogers tear-jerker "Kitty Foyle" (1940) to "Papillon" (1973), the Devil's Island drama starring Steve McQueen and Dustin Hoffman.

DALTON TRUMBO

By Larry Ceplair and Christopher Trumbo Kentucky, 703 pages, \$40

He is a culture hero to the old romantic American left, or what remains of it. For others, Trumbo is a problematic figure, elusive, contradictory and hard to admire. He was a blend of old-school Western American radical and sanctimonious red polemicist. He twice joined the American Communist Party, but professed to be bored by the rare meetings he attended and had no special love for Lenin or the Soviet Union. Still, he unerringly followed the party line and shrugged off Stalinist horrors. A B-movie hack for most of his career, he dreamed of escaping Hollywood to write serious novels and plays, but always relapsed into film work. He was ornery and hypersensitive to criticism, but a loyal friend who never considered saving himself by informing on others, as did many of his colleagues.

Now Trumbo, who died in 1976, is the subject of an exhaustive biography, a collaboration between his late son, Christopher, and Larry Ceplair, an academic. Like its subject, "Dalton Trumbo: Blacklisted Hollywood Radical" can be at once engaging and annoying as it tracks the man in excruciating detail through four fevered decades of drama on the left.

There's real irony in the fact that Trumbo's life turned on his appearance before inquisitors probing "un-American" activities, because the witness was a quintessential American. His father's family, the Von Trummelbachs, had emigrated from Switzerland to France (where they became Trumbeau) and then, in 1730, to Virginia, ending up just plain Trumbo. He grew up in Grand Junction, a small town on the western slope of the Colorado Rockies, wrote for the local paper while in high school, then took off for Los Angeles, where he worked nights for 10 years in a mammoth bread bakery while pounding out short stories and novels, nearly all of which went unpublished. Eventually he got a job on a movie magazine that led to studio work as a reader and his true calling, screenwriting.

Trumbo was as political as he was prolific. His horrific antiwar novel, "Johnny Got His Gun," was published in 1939 just as Hitler and Stalin signed their nonaggression pact. He was outspokenly opposed to America's entry in World War II—until Hitler invaded Russia and the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. Now gung-ho for the war, Trumbo joined numerous Popular Front organizations inspired by the Communist Party and became a party member himself in 1943.

The congressional investigations that started in 1947 never really produced any evidence that Hollywood Communists worked the party's devious lines into the movies they wrote, produced, directed and acted in. But it's indisputable that hundreds of party members and their sympathizers were influential in every facet of the movie industry. The hearings spawned the blacklist that eventually barred scores of entertainment people (among them, John Garfield, Gypsy Rose Lee, Burgess Meredith and Zero Mostel) from working not only in films but in broadcasting.

Trumbo and nine other screenwriters refused to answer questions about their own and others' Communist activities and, as the "Hollywood Ten," went off to federal prison for up to a year. Just before being jailed, Trumbo had been making the equivalent of \$500,000 a year in today's money as a script writer for MGM, Hollywood's premier studio. Thus began a decadeslong adventure for Trumbo in the netherworld of stealth scripts ostensibly written by "fronts" (supposedly non-Communist writers), penny-ante deals with low-rent independent producers, back-stabbing, double-crossing, and endless strategizing to evade the blacklist or destroy it.

Even a blacklist-inspired, unhappy exile in Mexico couldn't break his rhythm. Between 1954 and 1960, he was involved in more than 60 film stories, treatments and actual scripts, including ones for "The Brave One" and "Roman Holiday," which also won an Oscar. Nor could he cut his ties to the Communists. Having quit the CP without fanfare in 1947, he briefly rejoined in 1956 despite Nikita Khrushchev's revelations of Stalin's crimes.

A master of self-regard, Trumbo seems never to have discarded any script, treatment, contract, draft story or novel, letter, pamphlet, or scrap of paper that he had put his hand to. Mr. Ceplair, the principal author of the book, had access to the trove and quotes from it at such length that the reader risks drowning in a torrent of Trumbosity.

Trumbo never met anyone he couldn't argue with or any argument he didn't feel obliged to counter with his own withering analysis. He fought endlessly with director Stanley Kubrick, who drastically revised Trumbo's script for "Spartacus." After watching a rough cut of the film, Trumbo wrote a 68-page, scene-by-scene critique. Sample: "It is my duty to tell you—that this speech is a gut-turner, a festering, vomitous heap of garbage, an obscene catastrophe."

He was particularly adept at Talmudic parsing of the endless ideological squabbles and tactical scheming in which his Hollywood party colleagues indulged while trying to escape from the blacklist. Years after the blacklist ended, he was still grinding out long letters to ex-comrade Albert Maltz relitigating his case on some bone of contention better left unpicked. He had a toilet mouth, too. When Arthur Schlesinger Jr., a staunch anticommunist liberal, wrote, "I have never understood how people, who uphold Communism can without incongruity associate with an organization dedicated to civil liberties," Trumbo fired back: "sheer mindless gabble; garbage, as some call it; dreck, pure merde."

He could be disingenuous or, more charitably, blinded by his ideological biases. In 1954, he proclaimed that the Rosenbergs couldn't be guilty of spying because "it is inherently improbable that the Soviet Union would employ a Communist as an espionage agent, or the American Communist Party as a vehicle of espionage"—which is precisely what the Kremlin did, as NKVD files released after the collapse of the Soviet Union plainly show. He was constantly seeing "fascism" looming in postwar America. To Trumbo, America was irredeemably racist, at home and abroad—"our thirst for the blood of dark-skinned sub-humans is insatiable."

Unlike many of his brethren, Trumbo was charitable to the informers who admitted Communist Party membership and named others to free themselves from the blacklist. To him, everyone involved in the sorry episode, including the inquisitors, was a "victim" pressured by the times into dishonorable conduct—a position he defended until his last lung-cancer-stifled breath.

Mr. Ceplair's sympathies are plainly with Trumbo, although he does correct the record, as with the Rosenbergs, to show where Trumbo's zeal for his various causes ran aground on the hard facts of historical truth. And he is prone to wander off into the weeds: He chronicles seemingly every episode and controversy in Trumbo's life, a journey only the hardiest—or most masochistic—reader likely wants to share with him. Still, if a pointillist rendering of the populist history of the postwar American left is your passion, this is the book for you.

A few years before his death, Trumbo composed his own epitaph. "The blacklist," he wrote, "has done more to make my name known than any work I ever did." Right he was.

—Mr. Kosner, the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News, interviewed Trumbo for the New York Post when he emerged from the blacklist in 1960.

SHOW CONVERSATION (4) ▼

SPONSORED OFFERS

- WALMART: Walmart coupon: \$10 off all departments
KOHLS: 20% off your entire order with Kohl's coupon
EXPEDIA: Expedia promo: 50% off fully-refundable hotel bookings
EBAY: Up to 15% off branded sneakers or more with eBay coupon
HOME DEPOT: 10% off furniture using Home Depot coupon code
TARGET: Target baby registry - 15% off site-wide + \$80 of coupons

WSJ+ Enjoy a World of Benefits Anytime, Anywhere EXPLORE MORE

- RECOMMENDED VIDEOS
1. The Robot Revolution Is Happening—Like It or Not
2. What Kamala Harris Brings to Biden's Ticket
3. Widespread Looting in Chicago Leads to More Than 100 Arrests
4. Brooks Brothers, From Buttoned Up to Stripped Down
5. Police Body-Camera Footage Reveals New Details of George Floyd Killing

WSJ MEMBER MESSAGE One Word at a Time WSJ Puzzles is the elite, adventure for America's most elegant, humorous and addictive crosswords and other word games. PLAY NOW

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

- Why Is It Hard to Get a Rapid Covid-19 Test? The Machines Are in Short Supply
WSJ News Exclusive | Health by Coronavirus, Beset by Coronavirus, Health Authorities Brace for Flu Season
Israel, U.A.E. Agree to Establish Formal Diplomatic Ties
Beirut Explosion Unleashes Public Anger at Hezbollah, Lebanon's Most Powerful Group
Young Wuhan Evacuee Finds No Refuge From Coronavirus in U.S.
Summer Redstone Dies at 97; Media Mogul Who Said 'Content Is King'
'The Gold Standard': Why Chinese Startups Still Flock to the U.S. for IPOs
Weekly Unemployment Claims Drop Below One Million for First Time Since March
What Happens to All of the Unsold Clothes?
New U.S. Coronavirus Cases Tick Up Again as Back-to-School Worries Intensify

BACK TO TOP ▲

WSJ Membership, Customer Service, Tools & Features, Ads, More. Includes links for WSJ+ Membership Benefits, Subscription Options, Why Subscribe?, Corporate Subscriptions, Professor Journal, Student Journal, WSJ High School Program, WSJ Amenity Program, WSJ Live, Customer Center, Contact Us, Emails & Alerts, Guides, My News, RSS Feeds, Video Center, Watchlist, Podcasts, Advertise, Commercial Real Estate Ads, Place a Classified Ad, Sell Your Business, Sell Your Home, Recruitment & Career Ads, Coupons, About the Newsroom, Content Partnerships, Corrections, Jobs at WSJ, Masthead, News Archive, Register for Free, Reprints, Buy Issues.