



Reflections on Things Past

Memories by writers Philip Yordan, Bernard Gordon, and Sidney Sheldon are kept alive by the Turner Classic Movies Archival Project.

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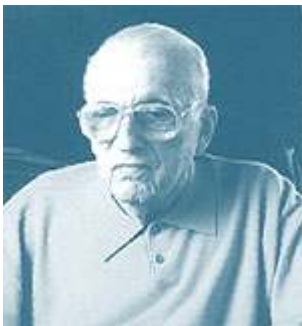


"Sure, I hired guys who were blacklisted," veteran screenwriter Philip Yordan says to his interviewer. Gazing into the camera, he adds, "It didn't make any difference to me. Most of the time, I didn't even know they were blacklisted."

Yordan points to the door separating him and the TCM crew from the green room where Bernard Gordon waits. "I didn't know about Bernie Gordon being on the blacklist," he adds. "In Europe, it was suggested I get a stable of writers to develop projects. Bernie happened to be visiting Madrid. I asked him if he was interested, and he said sure. That was it."



Soon a colony of blacklisted writers was working happily under Yordan's auspices. "I must say that I made no discrimination," adds Yordan. "The blacklisted received the same pay as writers in Hollywood."



Anecdotes such as these are preserved for history in the TCM Archival Project. When Atlanta-based Turner Entertainment Group acquired the MGM film library in 1994, it led to the creation of Turner Classic Movies, cable broadcasts of films from the '30s, '40s, and '50s. The original goal of the TCM Archival Project was to film anecdotal material to add color to their broadcast of classic films. Today, the project has become a true library resource for the motion picture industry. TCM keeps a digital beta copy of each interview in Atlanta while the master footage goes to the Margaret Herrick Library at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences Center for Motion Picture Study in Beverly Hills.

From top: Bernard Gordon, Sidney Sheldon, and Philip Yordan.

"We had already acquired extensive libraries from RKO and Warner Bros. and discovered that there was not only keen public interest in these movies but in the people who made these films as well," says Tom Karsch, executive vice president and general manager of TCM. "We decided to film interviews with as many movie pros as possible who were

witnesses to that period of movie history before the old studio system disappeared."

The people at TCM learned that the veterans of the Golden Age of filmmaking were a fast diminishing resource and if their reminiscences were to be captured it would have to be done quickly. "That same year we began the TCM Archival Project with the sole mandate of securing as many voices from that period as possible," says Alexa Foreman, TCM project producer who started at TCM in 1994 as a researcher.

Twice a year for the past six years, Foreman's film crew has traveled to New York or Los Angeles after having solicited the cooperation of as many prominent film personalities as can be gathered in one spot for three days of reminiscing. To date, more than 200 filmed interviews have been archived by TCM, including such veteran writers as Garson Kanin, Ring Lardner Jr., Gore Vidal, Budd Schulberg, Arthur Penn, Anita Loos, and Paul Mazursky.

In October 2000, TCM set up shop in a suite at the Park Hyatt Hotel in Century City and in successive interviews chronicled the colorful nostalgia of longtime WGA members Philip Yordan (Dillinger, Detective Story, Johnny Guitar, among many others), Bernard Gordon (Krakatoa, East of Java; Day of the Triffids, etc.) and Sidney Sheldon (Easter Parade, Annie Get Your Gun, etc.). With Yordan and Gordon, the opportunity became a reunion party for screenwriters who had formed a mutual support alliance during the dark days of the blacklist.

Philip Yordan

Yordan's career as a screenwriter and producer spanned five decades and includes more than 50 credited feature films. As the TCM interviewer diligently attempted to keep Yordan focused on one subject at a time, the writer enjoyed letting his memories hopscotch back and forth from his early years in Hollywood as a script reader and script doctor to his success during the '60s and '70s as an expatriate filmmaker in Europe.

When asked about the studio days when powerful moguls ran the industry, Yordan beamed. "I loved the old system," he stated unabashedly. "I knew all the studio heads: L.B.

Mayer at Metro, Harry Cohn at Columbia, Jack and Harry Warner, and Zanuck at Fox. I thought they were wonderful people and I liked them all. Once I had established a little reputation, I could walk into any studio and I'd be put on the payroll or they'd find me an assignment elsewhere. Whatever history has to say about guys like Mayer and Cohn, they were people who loved to make pictures and appreciated even the slightest talent."

Having arrived in Hollywood in the early '40s, the 32-year-old Yordan established himself in the film noir genre with the gangster bio feature Dillinger (1945), for which he received an Academy Award nomination for original screenplay. At the mere mention of the film, Yordan offered his own anecdotal take on why the immensely popular film did not win him an Oscar.



No credit? In 1963 blacklisted Bernard Gordon wrote under a pseudonym for Philip Yordan's adaptation of John Wyndham's sci-fi classic *The Day of the Triffids*.



Memory Lane: Sidney Sheldon, holding his Oscar for writing *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer* in 1947, chats with George Murphy (center) and Valentine Davies (left).

"I wrote the script [with Leon Charles], and it was produced by Monogram Pictures for very little money," he recalled. "It starred Larry [Lawrence] Tierney as John Dillinger. Larry was a complete unknown and a bit nutty, but he came off great as Dillinger. The audiences loved him. Now the reason a small studio like Monogram was able to produce the film was due to an agreement the major studios had made with Congress not to make gangster films. Frank King, the head of Monogram, was never asked to sign the agreement, so he was free to produce Dillinger.

"When the release of Dillinger was announced, L.B. [Mayer] was furious. He called King and pleaded with him to destroy the negative. So Frank King said to me, 'Well I'm gonna ask him for a million dollars. We're rich.' But L.B. called him back and said he wouldn't give Frank a dime. He should just destroy it for the good of the industry.

"Of course, Monogram released the film and then when I received the Oscar nomination, things really got crazy. Walter Wanger, who had the inside know on what was going on at the Academy, later told me that I had the votes to win, but they just couldn't give an Oscar to an original screenplay about a gangster like Dillinger. It would cause an uproar in Congress. Well, they couldn't find another American picture that would fill the bill without causing a scandal. So they decided to give the screenwriting Oscar to a Swiss picture called *Marie Louise*, which nobody has ever seen."

Yordan, who went on to receive a 1954 Best Screen Story Oscar for *Broken Lance* [screenplay by Richard Murray, based on *House of Strangers*, a novel by Jerome Weidman] and another nomination (with co-writer Robert Wyler) for *Detective Story* [1951, based on a play by Sidney Kingsley], allowed his extensive memory to flow over myriad projects, including the monumental difficulties in coming up with a workable script for the biblical epic *King of Kings* [1961] and a delicious little anecdote on the making of the Joan Crawford-starring, Nicholas Ray-directed anti-Western *Johnny Guitar* [1953, based on a novel by Roy Chanslor].

"Back then, Lou Wasserman [former head of MCA] was originating films for Paramount and Republic Pictures. He would pick the script, the cast, the director, and all the way through. So he got Joan Crawford for a lot of money, and she went on location to Arizona to shoot this thing. Nick Ray was directing. Well, a few days into it, Wasserman called me around 11:30 at night. He said Crawford had sent for a Cadillac from Los Angeles to pick her up in Arizona to take her home. She was walking from the picture. Wasserman told her that he was going to fly me to the location and told her that I would solve all the problems. So they hired a private plane for me that looked like it was gonna fall apart, and I had to get to Crawford before the Cadillac did.



Sidney Sheldon's 1948 script for the musical *Easter Parade* lured Fred Astaire out of temporary retirement.

"When I arrived at this remote location where the film was being shot, Nick told me Crawford felt like an idiot in the film. Her co-stars Sterling Hayden and Scott Brady get to shoot it out, and she

walks around in a red dress doing nothing. So I went to her and pleaded, 'What can I do to make you do the picture?' She told me flatly she wanted to shoot it out with Mercy (Mercedes) McCambridge and kill her. She wanted to be like Gary Cooper. I told her, 'You got it.' I wrote the scene. It was filmed, and that's it."

When asked about the blacklist, Yordan is quick to explain that he had never been blacklisted and his decision to become an expatriate in Europe during the '60s and '70s was strictly business. "I moved to Europe to work with [producer] Sam Bronston. It was wonderful. It just happened that all the financing was there, and I enjoyed living in a luxury that I could never afford in America."

Yordan and Bronston produced epic productions for big budgets and small budgets, usually in Spain. During this time, Yordan turned out such films as *King of Kings*, *El Cid* [story by and co-written with Frederic M. Frank], *55 Days at Peking* [with Bernard Gordon], *The Day of the Triffids* [screenplay by Bernard Gordon, based on the novel by John Wyndham], *The Fall of the Roman Empire* [screenplay by Ben Barzman and Basilio Franchono and Philip Yordan], *Battle of the Bulge* [written by Nicholas Cominos & Jack Lyman], *Custer of the West* [written by Bernard Gordon and Julian Zimet], and many others. He dismissed the notion, however, that as the producer of many of these films he should be lauded for purposefully trying to give work to blacklisted writers.

Bernard Gordon

Despite Yordan's protestations, Bernard Gordon unabashedly praised his former boss as a savior of his career. (Ed Rampall's Bernard Gordon bio article, "The Man Who Came in From the Cold," appeared in the August 2000 issue of *Written By*). "I not only survived the blacklist," reminisced Gordon, "I actually thrived in Europe working for Yordan." Gordon recently published his autobiography, *Hollywood Exile: Or How I Learned to Love the Blacklist*.

When it was his turn before the TCM cameras, Gordon happily recalled his early years in Hollywood during the late 1930s as well as his pride in being a member of the Communist Party. "I was 21 years old when I got here in 1938 from New York," he recalled. "At first I worked as a reader in the story department at Paramount and eventually worked my way up to story editor." In 1942, during the height of the U.S./USSR alliance against Nazism, Gordon joined the Communist Party, helped found the Screen Readers Guild, and became its first president. "No one else wanted the job, so I got it," he laughed.

It was during his tenure at Paramount that Gordon first became aware of how strong the ties were between Hollywood and the people in Washington, D.C. "It wasn't well known at the time, but every studio had a huge file room with material that had been bought or written and not used," said Gordon. "They had thousands of unproduced scripts and stories. When I was promoted beyond being a mere reader, one of my jobs was to go through the accumulated material and try to find things that could be used.



Russian Roulette: The United States and the USSR joined forces to combat illegal aliens in the 1956 *The Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* [screenplay by George Washington Yates and Bernard Gordon, story by Curt Siodmak, based on *Flying Saucers From Outerspace* by Major Donald E. Keyhoe].

"One day I was going through a bunch of manuscripts in that file room at Paramount, and I ran into a file of stories purchased from J. Edgar Hoover. Well, that simply meant he was on the payroll at Paramount, and I'm sure at every other studio. He would send in a few pages. They would pay him, and everybody was happy."



Who knew? The only movie to star Ronald Reagan and his future wife Nancy Davis was in 1957, *Hellcats of the Navy* [screenplay by David Lang and Bernard Gordon, story by David Lang, based on a book by Charles A. Lockwood and Hans Christian Adamson.

Gordon laughed when talking about his early problems with the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) because his story is far different from most blacklisted screenwriters. He was blacklisted before he ever established himself as a screenwriter. By the '50s, Gordon was scrounging for any kind of work he could get, including a brief attempt at being "the world's worst plastics salesman." When asked if there were any incidents during that time that hurt him more than most, Gordon recalled an incident with his young daughter that angered him greatly.

"I had not yet been served the subpoena, and most of us at that time tried to avoid accepting the subpoena with a thought that maybe if we didn't appear before the Committee we'd fall through the cracks and not become blacklisted. So there was the marshal outside in his car waiting to catch me, and there was my four-year-old daughter, Ellen, who loved to answer the door when the door bell rang and pull it open and be friendly. We didn't want her to do that at the time, and we didn't know what to say to her. So we told Ellen this man was just trying to sell Daddy some magazines, and we didn't want to be bothered, so don't answer the door. It worked, but it certainly didn't make me too happy to have to lie to my daughter."

Gordon whimsically recalled how he spent most of the rest of the '50s writing under aliases or not getting any credit at all. During his expatriate days working in Europe with Philip Yordan, "I was making \$2,000 a week in Spain. I had the most magnificent apartments, either in Spain or in Paris, for \$500 a month fully furnished. I had two cars, one with a chauffeur. I would take whatever vacation time I could steal in St. Moritz and Switzerland."

Gordon even managed to get some work done. He was particularly happy to recall his experience of working with Yordan in 1963 on *The Day of the Triffids*.

"On that project I didn't write under my own name," he recalled. "It became a science-fiction cult classic, and I didn't get my name on it for quite a while. But working on that film, I finally believed I had become a successful writer.

Throughout February, Turner Classic Movies has scheduled its programming to spotlight great film writers.

EARLY HOLLYWOOD GREATS: friday, february 2

8 p.m.: *Scarface* (1932) Ben Hecht and Seton I.

Miller and John Lee Mahin and W.R. Burnett and Fred Pasley, based on the novel by Armitage Trail

9:45 p.m.: [The Women](#) (1939) Anita Loos and Jane Murfin, based on the play by Clare Booth

Midnight: [Dinner at Eight](#) (1933) Frances Marion and Herman J. Mankiewicz and Donald Ogden Stewart, based on play by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber

GREAT WRITING TEAMS: saturday, february 3

8 p.m.: [Pat and Mike](#) (1952) Ruth Gordon & Garson Kanin

10 p.m.: [Auntie Mame](#) (1958) Betty Comden & Adolph Green, based on the play by Jerome Lawrence & Robert E. Lee, adapted from the novel by Patrick Dennis

12:30 a.m.: [The Cowboys](#) (1972) Irving Ravetch & Harriet Frank Jr. and William Dale Jennings, based on the novel by Jennings

2:45 a.m.: [Father of the Bride](#) (1950) Frances Goodrich & Albert Hackett, based on the novel by Edward Streeter

4:30 a.m.: [The Public Enemy](#) (1931) Kubec Glasmon & John Bright and Harvey Thew, based on the original story Beer and Blood by Bright

NOVELISTS AS SCREENWRITERS: friday, february 9

8 p.m.: [Strangers on a Train](#) (1951) Raymond Chandler and Czenzi Ormonde, adapted by Whitfield Cook, based on the novel by Patricia Highsmith

10 p.m.: [The Big Sleep](#) (1946) William Faulkner and Leigh Brackett and Jules Furthman, based on a novel by Raymond Chandler

Midnight: [Three Comrades](#) (1938) F. Scott Fitzgerald and Edward E. Paramore, based on the novel by Erich Maria Remarque

PLAYWRIGHTS AS SCREENWRITERS: saturday, february 10

8 p.m.: [Barefoot in the Park](#) (1967) Neil Simon, based on his play

10 p.m.: [Sweet Smell of Success](#) (1957) Clifford Odets and Ernest Lehman, from Tell Me About It Tomorrow, a novelette by Lehman

Midnight: [The Wrong Man](#) (1957) Maxwell Anderson and Angus MacPhail, based on The True Story of Christopher Emmanuel Balestrero by Anderson

2 a.m.: [All Fall Down](#) (1962) William Inge, based on novel by James Leo Herlihy

4 a.m.: [Room Service](#) (1938) Morrie Ryskind, based on the play by John Murray & Allen Boretz

WRITER/DIRECTORS: friday, february 16

8 p.m.: [Love in the Afternoon](#) (1957) Billy Wilder & I.A.L. Diamond, based on the novel Ariane by Claude Anet

10:30 p.m.: [The Maltese Falcon](#) (1941) John Huston, based on the novel by Dashiell Hammett

12:15 a.m.: [In Cold Blood](#) (1967) Richard Brooks, based on the book by Truman Capote

2:30 a.m.: [M](#) (1931) Fritz Lang and Thea von Harbou and Paul Falkenberg and Adolf Jansen and Karl Vash, based on an article by Egon Jacobson

BLACKLISTED WRITERS: saturday, february 17

8 p.m.: [Exodus](#) (1960) Dalton Trumbo, based on a novel by Leon Uris

11:30 p.m.: [Life With Father](#) (1947) Donald Odgen Stewart, based on the play by Howard Lindsey & Russell Crouse and the book by Clarence Day Jr.

1:30 a.m.: [Salt of the Earth](#) (1954) Michael Wilson

3:30 a.m.: [Action in the North Atlantic](#) (1943) John Howard Lawson, story by Guy Gilpatrick, adapted by A.I. Bezzerides and W.R. Burnett

CLASSIC FILM WRITERS STILL WORKING: friday, february 23

8 p.m.: [Darling](#) (1965) Frederic Raphael, based on a story by Raphael, John Schlesinger, and Joseph Janni

"Day of the Triffids had a lot of interesting things going on. Philip Yordan was the producer, and he had nothing but problems. First, the screenplay was originally supposed to be shot in Spain. That didn't happen. It was eventually shot in England with English actors, and there were problems with the special effects. They ended up with about 60 minutes of usable film, and that just wasn't going to fly. Yordan came to me and said. 'We've got to add 30 minutes to this picture.' Well, the stars were gone--how do you add 30 minutes to a picture? Yordan was always full of good ideas. He said, 'We'll do it in a single place with a new cast of characters, and then intercut it with the previously shot film.

"So I created a story of two people, a husband and wife stuck on a lighthouse island in the North Sea off of England. I wrote this 30-page scene, and I gave it to him. Yordan read the pages and told me it wouldn't work because it was too good. He said my scene was about real people and didn't belong in this kind of science-fiction picture. I think I told him to drop dead. But later, Yordan convinced the English production company to produce it by claiming he had written the scene. When I found out about it, I confronted Yordan. He said, 'What's the difference who writes it? You're getting paid.' The end result was that the scene was shot, and it became the most important part of the picture although it has nothing to do with the book on which the picture was based. I eventually got a credit on that film."

When Gordon and Yordan finally sit together after their TCM tapings, Yordan proclaims to all, "Don't believe anything Gordon says or writes about me!"

Sidney Sheldon

Born in 1917, Sidney Sheldon has been successful in nearly every writing genre. The winner of an Oscar (Best Original Screenplay for the 1947 comedy *The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer*), a Tony, and an Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America, Sheldon has penned 25 major motion pictures, more than 200 television scripts, six Broadway plays, and 15 novels, ranking him as one of world's most prolific writers.

Despite his impressive credentials, Sheldon actually exuded an aura of nervous anticipation when put before the TCM camera crew. Like Gordon, Sheldon began his Hollywood career as script reader prior to World War II. "I was making \$17 as a reader while collaborating with Ben Roberts on scripts for Republic Studios," he recalled. "I can't even call them B pictures. They were Z pictures. But we got paid, and we got screen credits. We were professionals."

Sheldon's fledgling screenwriting career was interrupted by World War II. After serving in the Air Force, Sheldon went to New York and immediately penned three musicals that ran simultaneously on Broadway: *Merry Widow*, *Jackpot*, and *Dream With Mule*. But he had every

10:15 p.m.: [Harper](#) (1966) William Goldman, based on *The Moving Target*, a novel by Ross MacDonald

12:30 a.m.: [The Best Man](#) (1964) Gore Vidal, based on his play

WGA LAUREL AWARD WINNERS: saturday, february 24

8 p.m.: [The Hunchback of Notre Dame](#) (1939) Sonya Levien, adapted by Bruno Frank, based on the novel by Victor Hugo

10 p.m.: [Interiors](#) (1978) Woody Allen

11:30 p.m.: [The Hospital](#) (1971) Paddy Chayefsky

1:30 a.m.: [Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?](#) (1966) Ernest Lehman, based on the play by Edward Albee

3 a.m.: [Sunday in New York](#) (1964) Norman Krasna, based on his play

intention of getting back to Hollywood. "While still in New York, I wrote a story called Suddenly It's Spring. I took it to Hollywood as a kind of calling card and sold it to David Selznick. It was to star Cary Grant, Myrna Loy, and a teenage Shirley Temple. David hired me to write the screenplay, but one day he called me in and told me he was changing the title to The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer. And because I knew so much about show business, I said, 'Mr. Selznick, sir, nobody is going to pay to see a picture called The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer.'

"So it opened at Radio City Music Hall. I got an Oscar, and that's how much I know about show business. Anyway, that was the beginning. From there I went to MGM as a writer and left 12 years later as a writer-producer-director."

The TCM interviewer guided Sheldon through a detailed survey of his writing career, but Sheldon was at his liveliest when talking about two subjects, Cary Grant and the making of the Judy Garland/Fred Astaire musical Easter Parade. "Any writer in Hollywood in that era who wrote comedies wrote with one person in mind, Cary Grant," affirmed Sheldon. "And if you were really lucky, you got him for a movie. He was the best, and he made it all look very easy. His sense of comedy was brilliant."

When asked about the 1948 MGM hit musical Easter Parade, Sheldon laughs. "I knew it was going to be great. It had songs by Irving Berlin, and it was going to star Judy Garland and Gene Kelly. We were to start shooting on Monday, but the producer, Arthur Freed, called me into his office on Friday night. Freed told me Gene Kelly had broken his leg. I thought it was a joke. When I realized he was serious, I said, 'What are we gonna do? Are we gonna postpone?'

"He said no. He had sent my script to Fred Astaire, who had gone into retirement. And if Fred liked it, we'd go with him right away. I said, 'Wait a minute--Fred Astaire is a grandfather! Judy Garland is a young girl, and no one is gonna be rooting for them to get together. It won't work.' So Fred Astaire liked the script. We made the movie, and Easter Parade went into history. Again, that's how much I know about show business."

When the TCM crew conclude their scheduled interviews, producer Foreman smiles wearily. "This is a project that will never end," she says. "And we are always feeling a sense of urgency. We have already lost more than 30 of the film personalities we have interviewed. But we are determined to capture as many as we can of those who are still alive. And as time goes on, we will be adding new names to our list as filmmaking continues."