

## The Survivor

Even while blacklisted, Walter Bernstein helped create modern television.

**Written by Edward Summer**

(From the February 2002 issue of "Written By")

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**Walter Bernstein**

One extraordinary group of Class A writers took refuge from the political maelstrom of the 1950s in a small dairy restaurant on New York City's Upper West Side. Hiding among bowls of steaming soup and plates of sour cream-covered blintzes, and right under the watchful eyes of spiffily suited agents of the FBI, blacklisted writers Abraham Polonsky, Arnold Manoff, and Walter Bernstein nearly single-handedly, and anonymously, constructed the strong, straight artistic backbone of the first wave of modern television.

In 1976 Walter Bernstein softly fictionalized and permanently immortalized this benevolent and besieged cabal in the brilliant bulls-eye comedy-drama *The Front*. If you're post literate, too busy for history books, or like your facts humorously but accurately imagined, watch *The Front*. Woody Allen's character, Howard Prince, is an amalgam of many real life "fronts" who bravely (for the most part) pretended to be writers so that blacklisted scribes could hide from the official cadre of "witch-hunters" giving the stamp of approval to the political credentials of each and every employee of each and every television network. Alfred Miller (Michael Murphy) is a composite of blacklisted writers, largely based upon Bernstein himself.

**Bernstein's book *Inside Out: A Memoir of the Blacklist* (Knopf, 1996)** serves up the story with all of the sharp corners still in place. Either way, there's no better record of a life on the receiving end of unjust political and artistic oppression brought on by courageous acts of conscience.

Although Walter Bernstein at 82 years old might have given up the regular consumption of sour cream and blintzes, he seems otherwise unchanged from the energy and high standards he has brought to bear upon virtually everything he's written since he was first published in the *New Yorker* magazine before World War II.

Bernstein wrote hundreds of television shows for such early television series as *Danger*, *The Somerset Maugham Theatre*, *Philco Playhouse*, *Playhouse 90*, *The Web*, and especially *You Are There*, which created the standard for fine historical drama. His score of remarkable screenplays include *The Front*, the ever-relevant and disturbing *The Molly Maguires*, *Fail-Safe*, *Heller in Pink Tights* [co-written by Dudley Nichols], and *Semi-Tough*.

His phone rings constantly and his desk is crowded with papers. He is in discussions on several new projects for which people actually come to New York City to meet with him.

**Edward Summer: *Was it an emotional shock when you were blacklisted?***

**Walter Bernstein:** It was a terrible shock because you couldn't understand it. Previously, I had felt totally that I could be rich and holy at the same time. I was being accepted. I had written for the *New Yorker*, my politics had been approved of during the war, so when the blacklist hit, it was, "Where is this coming from? Why me?" All I wanted to do was write good movies and I wasn't trying to--none of us were trying to--slip Communist propaganda into the movies. That was silly.

We had a support system that was very important. This little group that I formed with Abraham Polonsky and Arnold Manoff sustained us. There was a generosity of spirit. We laughed a lot. We saw each other socially, the kids saw each other, and we helped each other. We'd find work, we'd try to find work, we'd help each other with scripts, and we'd help other blacklisted writers if we could.

***There must have been times when you were horribly depressed.***

That was mostly at the beginning. I was lucky. I really was lucky. I didn't immediately get depressed. First of all, I hooked up with Sidney Lumet and Charles Russell because I'd been writing *Danger* for them. I was able to continue working, which was a big thing. I didn't have long periods where I was getting no work at all. Later on there would be periods when I had trouble: I couldn't get a front, or when *Danger* and *You Are There* were over and I didn't have Russell and Lumet to fall back on.

Secondly, unlike Abe Polonsky, who was at the start of what would have been a brilliant career, I was just starting in, so I didn't have a career to lose. I had several actor friends who never recovered because when they were blacklisted they had a promising career already. When they were un-blacklisted, nobody knew who they were. They had to start all over again, and they couldn't adapt to that.

***Were you ever unable to concentrate and think of anything?***

Yes, there were those moments. You were ostracized from the main body of society. You really were. Your friends became people like yourselves to a large extent. You saw other people, but it was frequently awkward. I remember going to see Fred Coe, who had produced *The Rich Boy*, a show that I wrote in 1950, at a time that I needed work and asking him for a job. He said he had no assignments. It was a very uncomfortable, unpleasant meeting. He was very Southern and very polite and very nice, but essentially he just wanted me to go away.

***How many different fronts did you have?***

I would say in those 10 years maybe a dozen.



It was a time of great misery for the people like Zero Mostel, for the actors, for the directors because they couldn't work. They had to find other kinds of work. Financially, it was harder for them. I survived.



Walter Bernstein

***Do you still feel uncomfortable talking about them?***

Yeah, because I feel that it's not up to me. It's up to them. In the book I didn't use any real names.

***How many are still around?***

I know what's happened to just one of them. Leo is dead. The main person who fronted for me--I guess I can use his name--is a wonderful guy named Leslie Slote, who was a childhood friend of my younger brother. He had a job at that time on a civil service newspaper, *The Chief*, and he had no big ambitions to be a movie or a TV writer. He was doing it as a friend. He wouldn't take any money for it, and he got kind of a kick out of it. He is lovely. He went on to become an assistant press secretary to Mayor Wagner here in New York, and then he was Nelson Rockefeller's press secretary. Now he's semi-retired and has become an Egyptologist. When I was writing the book, we spent some time together. I wanted to check my memories with his.

There was another man, I won't mention his name, I rewrote his whole script, I remember, which wasn't very good. Sidney Lumet directed the show, which won a prize. The original guy went off to Hollywood where he became a successful writer-producer.

***Did you watch the shows when they were aired?***

Oh yes, sure. My feeling was "fuck 'em." I was working, I was writing, I was getting paid for it. Just my name wasn't on it. Those reactions are so individual. I think of Abe Polonsky, who was about to embark upon a big writer-director contract at Fox and how it must have felt for him, although he never expressed bitterness at the time. It was much tougher on him than on me. Manoff was a totally different kind of guy: He had never been comfortable in Hollywood and was very happy to get out.

You would get twinges, of course, if you saw someone else's name on a successful show. I remember when Leslie accepted a Christopher Award for *The Prince and the Pauper*, a teleplay that I wrote, which introduced Patty Duke. Leslie got the award in his name.

I didn't hit any real pit of depression in that period. Maybe I should have, but I didn't. I was angry at the situation, angry at what was happening. When I look back on that time, I don't look back on it as a time of great misery. I worked. That made all the difference. It was a time of great misery for the people like Zero [Mostel], for the actors, for the directors, because they couldn't work. They had to find other kinds of work. Financially it was harder for them. I survived.

### ***Didn't the IRS bother you?***

We were very scrupulous about that. We took for granted that the FBI or the IRS was looking at our returns. They may or may not have, but we acted on that assumption, just like we acted on the assumption that they looked at our mail or tapped our phones. Whoever got the money paid the legitimate tax. We were never asked, but if we were, I would have said that I collaborated or did research for somebody. Maybe they thought we were just too small fry to bother with. The amount of money was negligible. We were very lucky that way.



Walter Bernstein, Martin Ritt

### ***Suppose that the whole blacklist had never happened. Would you have written different material?***

Not basically, I don't think. In certain respects I think the "bitterness" in some of the pieces like the *Danger* shows might not have been the same. But it would have depended not just on the blacklist, but that whatever was happening in general would also have affected my work. I always tried to write what you would call social stories. It always would have been related to that, I think, whether there was a blacklist or not. I still would have tried to write things like *The Molly Maguires* or *Fail-Safe*. So in that sense, it wouldn't have been different. But I don't know what my career might have been, whether I would have gone back to Hollywood. So it's hard to tell. I think I would have actually written the same kind of things. Once again, I was lucky!

### ***Your film style resembles Hemingway in many ways.***

When I graduated from Erasmus High School, I went to France. I took two books with me: *The Sun Also Rises* and the James Farrell *Studs Lonigan* trilogy. I just read them and reread them and reread them. It was the kind of writing that attracted me and that I wanted to write like.

### ***Didn't you get started at the New Yorker pretty young?***

I sold them a very short story called "House Party" when I was in college. It's about some jerky college kids who invite a model up to a Dartmouth house party. I sent it to a friend of the family, Moss Hart, a playwright. We had summer places next to each other at Camp Copake, an adult camp that doesn't exist any more at the confluence of New York, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. Singles would come, the women looking for guys and the guys looking to get laid, mainly. Moss was supposed to be the social director, but one summer he suddenly had his big successful show, *Once in a Lifetime*. So instead of being the social director, he took one of the bungalows at the camp for his family, right next to my family's. My parents and his parents became friends. I was 12. Moss took an interest in me and was terribly, terribly nice. I would go to rehearsals of his shows. When I wrote this story, I was about 18, and I sent it to him for his comments. Unbeknownst to me, he sent it to Harold Ross at the *New Yorker*. The next thing I knew I got a check for \$50. And two weeks later I got another check for \$30 saying, "We didn't pay you enough." So I got \$80 for the story: a lot of money. I worked for them for a couple of weeks during my junior and senior years doing "Talk of the Town" reporting.

During the time I spent overseas in the Army, I was a reporter-at-large. When I got out of the Army, I went on staff there, but I didn't really write anything because I was in a kind of new-

civilian paralysis. I'd just go into the office and then leave and go to the movies. But a book of my wartime essays came out, and on the basis of the book I got an agent, a man named Harold Hecht, who later became Burt Lancaster's partner. He got me a contract to go to Hollywood for six weeks. I stayed for six months.

***Writing prose and movies and television are different kinds of writing. Was it a change from writing for the New Yorker?***

I'm essentially a word person. I'm not really accustomed to seeing things visually. At the same time, I lived in movie houses. That whole way of telling a story always appealed to me. In the journalism I did for the *New Yorker*, the reportage was dramatically constructed. That is what I did well, if I did anything well: pieces that came to some kind of dramatic climax. Those were the kinds of pieces that Bill Shawn, the editor, who was a genius at knowing what his writers could do, assigned me or encouraged me to do. I was no good, for example, at writing profiles.

I come from a tradition that believed in the primacy of content, so that's what I was always looking for. What is this story about? How can I tell it dramatically? A movie like *The Front*, for example, is not a very visual movie at all. It's a very writerly movie. *The Molly Maguires* is somewhat different. The two writers I learned a lot from in the six months when I first went to Hollywood were [Robert] Rossen, who had spent years and years at Warner's as a contract writer, and Ben Maddow, who was very, very gifted and very visually oriented. I came back from Hollywood then and went into live television. It was such a hybrid medium because it's not theater and it's not movies; it's somewhere in between. In a creative sense we were really writing radio plays that you could see.

***Did you feel like a pioneer in 1948 or '49, when you first got to work in TV?***

Oh, absolutely! It was exciting because you were making it up as you went along. It was happening fast. *Danger* was melodrama, and you tried to put a little character into it. It was bang-bang stuff with some pretty solemn endings. I came onto it when Yul Brynner was the director and Marty Ritt was the producer. There were all kinds of mistakes. We did on *Danger* what might have been the first remote show. We did the show in the basement of Madison Square Garden, where the circus was. At the climax of the show, the villain got too near the tiger cage and the tiger reached out and clawed him. In rehearsal, the tiger's trainer stood out of camera range with a big pole, and on cue he jabbed him, and the tiger reared up. Sidney had a shot of the tiger rearing up and then cut to the villain staggering back with blood pouring from his throat. It was just great! On air, we got up to that point, and the tiger had been waiting. The trainer jabbed it, and the tiger sat back and didn't react at all! And Sidney had to have that shot to cut to the shot of the villain staggering back with the blood pouring out!



**Walter Bernstein in 1976 with Woody Allen (left) on the set of *The Front*.**

***Did you hang around on the sets at all when you were blacklisted?***

Not really. When we were doing [a new version of] *Fail-Safe* recently; Walter Cronkite did an opening for it. I had never met him before. I asked him: "Did you know when you were doing *You Are There* that there were blacklisted people writing it?" He said for the first year he didn't know, but he was curious because he always wondered why there weren't any writers on the set. And then at the end of the first year, Sidney and Charlie Russell took him out for a drink and told him. And, of course, it was fine with him.

### ***How close is The Front to what really went on?***

Very close. There are quite a number of things that actually did happen. The whole incident with Zero at the resort happened. I drove him up to the Concord Hotel where he had played before for two or three grand a night. The manager cut his pay when he got up there and said to him, in effect, you've got to take it. Zero went on and did his act in such a rage--screaming, yelling at the audience, and cursing them in Yiddish. It was a big audience: 1,500 people or so. And the more he did it, the more they loved him, the more they laughed and thought it was part of the act. He couldn't get the rage off. He came offstage when he finished, but they kept calling him back. He just insulted them more. He drank most of a bottle of whiskey, and I put him to bed, and we drove home the next day.

That's what I wanted him to do in the movie. He couldn't do it. It was still, even after all those years, too painful. It would have been an extraordinary moment if he could have done that.

### ***The Front has a brilliant script: good story, rich characters, entertaining, funny, witty, moral.***

I hadn't seen it for many years. In October I went out to the University of Oklahoma because the daughter of a friend of mine runs the film studies program there. She asked me to come and bring *The Front* and talk to about 400 film and history students. Much to my surprise, they dug it. They laughed; they cheered at the end. The question that was asked in all the classes I went to was: "Do you think it could happen again?" It had a certain relevance today. What is needed is always an external enemy, and we have one now. So I said, "Of course it could happen again!" The picture still worked in some kind of way, and I was very pleased about that.

### ***Did you tailor the parts to fit Zero and Woody Allen?***

I always wanted Zero. I didn't have Woody in mind when I wrote it at all. I didn't have anybody in mind.

Nothing was changed for Woody's casting. After he finished shooting the sequence with the committee, we looked at the dailies and Marty Ritt thought maybe it could be funnier. So Woody said, "Let's set it up again, and I'll improvise." We set up the scene, and he improvised for five or 10 minutes. He was so funny; he was hilarious. And it ruined the movie. The whole movie just sat while he did 10 minutes on stealing cookies from the Girl Scouts or when he was kid. He was just wonderful, but we didn't use any of it at all.

There was no adjustment when Zero was cast. The script was as it was; they did it as I wrote it. I've been lucky that way really because the directors that I worked for, Marty [Ritt], Michael Ritchie, [George] Cukor, [John] Schlesinger, Arthur Penn, they didn't want to be writers themselves. Good, bad, or indifferent, it was my script up there. It was what I wrote. I might not

have liked particularly the way they did the scene or something like that, but I couldn't cop out and say that they changed my script.

***What kind of working relationship did you have with directors during your career?***

Well, they all work totally differently. Sidney [Lumet] would read the script once, make his notes. I would then do another draft based on what we would work out together, on what he felt should be done. That was that, and Sidney went and shot the movie.

With Marty Ritt there was much more worrying about the script. We would talk over the stuff a lot. But with both of them, once we agreed, there was no fussing around. There was much more of that with *Semi-Tough*, where I did a certain amount of rewriting. If Michael [Ritchie] wanted something done, he didn't do it himself or the actors didn't change it; he would call me, and we would talk about what he felt was necessary.

***Do you ever conceal your age?***

No, never. It's amazing that I still get work in a business run by 19-year-olds. They must think I'm in my second childhood.

***People's sense of danger and fear rise at certain times in history. The Alien and Sedition Acts, for example, were passed after McKinley was assassinated. Things become especially hard when we have been attacked. Is that the sort of climate that you think leads to blacklisting?***

That's right. We have been attacked, and you have to do something about it. The question is, What do you do? We're always susceptible to that issue, to giving in to the fears and scapegoating. The establishment or the government that is pursuing a war, whether it's a cold war against the Soviet Union or another war, will find someone to demonize in order to frighten people into conformity, essentially. You always need an external enemy; now we have one.

We've discovered something new this time that we didn't discover in WWII though: our vulnerability. People feel very vulnerable, and they're scared. It's very easy then to say, "Do you want to be secure? Then we have to round up these people, or we have to establish these restrictions." A lot of people will trade their civil liberties for safety or what they think is safety. It may be a spurious safety. That's what you have to be scared of. It's a beast that's always lurking out there in this country and probably other countries, too.

It progresses depending on what happens in this undeclared war and also how resistant other parts of the establishment are: whether, for example, an influential paper like the *New York Times* comes out against it. So yeah, for me, I find it a scary time.

***How has all this left you feeling about the current film business?***



The question that was asked in all the classes I went to was: 'Do you think it could happen again?' It had a certain relevance today. What is needed is always an external enemy, and we have one now. So I said, 'Of course it could happen again!'



I still love writing movies. I don't think the movie business is in terribly good hands at the moment because it's in the hands of these conglomerates. The point is that in my experience the Warner brothers, Louis B. Mayer, Harry Cohn, [Darryl F.] Zanuck, they were monsters. But there was some part of them that cared about the movies they made. Their values might be different from yours or mine about what kind of movies they wanted, but they had some care about it. I don't think these people care about their movies now. It's just one aspect of their empire. If it brings in the profit they need, fine. Otherwise, they'll sell it and go off to something else. In that sense I think the atmosphere is not as healthy.

### ***How can we fix it?***

I don't know how you can fix it. If I knew I'd be flying around the world first-class! As a writer or artist, you try to find the cracks in the structure. One of the nice things I see happening is it's becoming cheaper to make movies with the digital stuff, and that's wonderful. There'll be more movies made. It depends, though, on what they make.

There's a wonderful story, which was probably apocryphal, but I like to think it's true. When Marconi sent the first wireless message, from Boston to Portland or something like that, a friend of Thoreau's came running out to Walden Pond to tell him the great news, about this great, great new invention that sent a message without a wire. And Thoreau looked at him and said: "But what did it say?"

I love that story, true or not. All this marvelous new technology and the ability to make cheap movies comes down to one thing: *What are you going to say with it?*

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