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This movie has been designated a Critic's Pick by the film reviewers of The Times.

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## **When an Eloquent Voice Was Stilled in Hollywood**

By **STEPHEN HOLDEN**

Peter Askin's stirring documentary "[Trumbo](#)" gives you reasons to cheer but also to weep. It makes you lament the decline of the kind of language brandished with Shakespearean eloquence by [Dalton Trumbo](#), the blacklisted Hollywood screenwriter, in his witty, impassioned letters excerpted in the movie.

Some of those letters, collected in the 1999 volume "Additional Dialogue," are delivered as forceful dramatic soliloquies by a battery of distinguished actors including [Joan Allen](#), [Brian Dennehy](#), [Michael Douglas](#), [Paul Giamatti](#), [Nathan Lane](#), [Liam Neeson](#), David Strathairn, [Josh Lucas](#) and [Donald Sutherland](#).

Another cause for lament is the shortness of historical memory in today's climate of infinite distraction. Why chew on the unhappy events of six decades ago when you can drool over pictures of Brangelina or get lost in the latest video game? Anyway, who cares what happened way back then?

But we should care. If the story of the Hollywood blacklist and the lives it destroyed has been told many times before, it still bears repeating, especially in the post-9/11 climate of fearmongering, of Guantánamo, of flag pins as gauges of patriotism.

"Trumbo," which Dalton Trumbo's son, Christopher, adapted from his own 2003 Off Broadway play of the same name, is much richer than its source, which originally starred Nathan Lane as Trumbo. It is a portrait of this notoriously cantankerous and combative writer as a noble champion of free speech who was willing to lose everything to defend his principles.

Beginning in 1950, Trumbo spent 11 months in prison for defying the House Un-American Activities Committee three years earlier by refusing to identify colleagues in the movie business who, like him, had dabbled with Communism. Trumbo joined the American Communist Party in 1943.

Before his blacklisting, Trumbo, who died in 1976 at age 70, was one of the most successful Hollywood screenwriters of the 1940s, with credits that included "[Kitty Foyle](#)," "[A Guy Named Joe](#)" and "[Thirty Seconds Over Tokyo](#)." With the blacklist, he became the most famous member of what came to be called the Hollywood Ten: writers and directors who had flirted with Communism during the Depression and World War II, when the Soviet Union was an ally and the horrors of Stalinism were yet to be revealed.

The movie's clips of the Congressional tribunal in which the elite of Hollywood were publicly interrogated by a sneering kangaroo court are as shocking as ever. After the hearings, producers and studio heads met at the Waldorf-Astoria to draw up the Waldorf Statement, which banned the Hollywood Ten from working in movies; henceforth they were pariahs.

A devastating Trumbo letter read by Mr. Neeson blames the producers more than Congress for the effectiveness of the blacklist, because they could "apply the only lash that really stings — economic reprisal." Their livelihood denied them, the Hollywood Ten were financially ruined and socially ostracized.

One of the saddest letters (read by Mr. Strathairn) is Trumbo's outraged protest to a teacher at his daughter Mitzi's school when Mitzi found herself shunned by her peers after word circulated about her father's history. The funniest letter (read by Mr. Lane), addressed to Christopher, is a hilarious high-flown disquisition on masturbation, an activity that Trumbo pursued as a youth with terrible guilt and fear of the consequences.

Interwoven among the letters are clips from television interviews with Trumbo, including one in which he calls the verdict "contempt of Congress" a just one because contempt was exactly what he felt. There are also home movies; personal reflections by Christopher and Mitzi; and revealing scenes from postblacklist movies like ["Papillon,"](#) ["The Sandpiper,"](#) ["The Fixer"](#) and ["Spartacus"](#) in which Trumbo used his characters as explicit moral and political mouthpieces.

Trumbo emerges as a fervently resolute, highly literate man of principle who, along with the other members of the Hollywood Ten, cited the First Amendment, protecting free speech, and not the Fifth, protecting self-incrimination, as his defense.

After his release from prison, Trumbo and his wife, Cleo, moved with their children to Mexico, where he soon exhausted his reserves. He returned to California, living as anonymously as possible, and resumed screenwriting for low pay, using pseudonyms (13 in all).

Two of those screenplays won Oscars: ["The Brave One,"](#) in 1957, for best writing of a motion picture story, was awarded to the fictional Robert Rich and went unclaimed. (Trumbo was finally given his award in 1975.) In 1954 he won in the same category for ["Roman Holiday,"](#) under the name of a friend, the British screenwriter Ian McLellan Hunter, who had fronted for him. The Oscar was presented posthumously to Cleo Trumbo in 1993.

In 1960 Trumbo finally received screen credit for his work again when [Kirk Douglas](#), the star and a producer of "Spartacus," and [Otto Preminger](#), the director of ["Exodus,"](#) overrode the blacklist. The documentary's biggest lapse is its failure to show exactly how they did it and the risks they took.

If only the movers and shakers of Hollywood 13 years earlier had stood together like the slaves in "Spartacus" and all claimed to have been Communists, the blacklist might have been averted. But they didn't. Fear can make people instant cowards and informers. Resisting it may be the ultimate test of character.

Today few would dispute Trumbo's assessment of that very dark period: "The blacklist was a time of evil, and no one who survived it on either side came through untouched by evil."

## *TRUMBO*

*Opens on Friday in New York and Los Angeles.*

Directed by Peter Askin; written by Christopher Trumbo, based on his play; directors of photography, Frank Prinzi, Jonathan Furmanski, Fred Murphy and Chris Norr; edited by Kurt Engfehr; music by Robert Miller; production designer, Stephanie Carroll; produced by Will Battersby, Tory Tunnell, Alan Klingenstein and David Viola; released by [Samuel Goldwyn](#) Films and Red Envelope Entertainment. Running time: 1 hour 36 minutes.

WITH READINGS BY: [Joan Allen](#), [Brian Dennehy](#), [Michael Douglas](#), [Paul Giamatti](#), [Nathan Lane](#), [Josh Lucas](#), [Liam Neeson](#), [David Strathairn](#) and [Donald Sutherland](#).

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