

A conversation with film historian Max Alvarez about Hollywood blacklist victim, actress Marsha Hunt (1917–2022): “The entertainment industry hierarchy is ... more acquiescent than ever”

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Actress Marsha Hunt died September 7 at the age of 104. She was one of last surviving victims of the Hollywood blacklist of the late 1940s and early 1950s. Never a Communist Party member, Hunt nonetheless became identified with opposition to the vicious witch-hunting in the film industry as a member, along with many other prominent Hollywood figures (Humphrey Bogart, John Huston, William Wyler, Danny Kaye, Lucille Ball, Burt Lancaster), of the Committee for the First Amendment in 1947.

That ad hoc body, which was organized to protest the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigation into left-wing activity in the movie industry, came under immense pressure and collapsed ignominiously amid the “anti-Red” hysteria of the time.

As a result of her activism, Hunt was named in *Red Channels*, the notorious anti-communist publication, in 1950, and “that ended my career,” as the actress told interviewer Glenn Lovell for *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (1997).

Hunt, who was born in Chicago (three weeks before the October Revolution in Russia!) and grew up in New York City, first worked as a model before being “discovered” by the film industry in the mid-1930s. She made a number of films for Paramount Pictures (1935-38) and then for MGM in the 1940s.

Hunt’s more important appearances included roles in the Greer Garson-Laurence Olivier *Pride and Prejudice* (Robert Z. Leonard, 1940); *Kid Glove Killer* (MGM) with Van Heflin (one of Fred Zinnemann’s early Hollywood efforts, 1942); *The Human Comedy* (based on William Saroyan and directed by Clarence Brown, 1943); Andre de Toth’s staunchly anti-Nazi work *None Shall Escape* (1944); *The Valley of Decision* (Tay Garnett’s drama about class and personal relations in the Pittsburgh steel industry, 1945); Edgar G. Ulmer’s fictional film about *Carnegie Hall* (1947), featuring a variety of legendary classical music performers; *Smash-Up: The Story of a Woman* (Stuart Heisler, 1947); and Anthony Mann’s scintillating film noir, *Raw Deal* (1948).

After being named in *Red Channels*, Hunt’s film offers more or less dried up. After the official end of the blacklist, she worked in movies and, most often, television in the 1960s and 1970s.

Asked by Lovell, “When did the blacklist end for you?” Hunt replied, “Never really. Never fully. Well, I can’t say the blacklist never ended, but what is true is that the momentum never was recaptured. I had such an ongoing, thriving career. What was it—fifty-some movies before the dark ages? Then, since 1950, I’ve made about eight.”

We recently spoke to Max Alvarez about Hunt’s life and career. The

conversation occurred almost 75 years to the day since the launching of the blacklist in September 1947 when dozens of left-wing figures in Hollywood were subpoenaed by HUAC.

Alvarez is a film historian and lecturer on world cinema culture whose presentation partnerships include The Smithsonian Institution, New Plaza Cinema in New York City, and numerous libraries and cultural organizations. His book *The Crime Films of Anthony Mann* was recently issued in paperback from University Press of Mississippi, and he was a major contributor to *Thornton Wilder: New Perspectives* from Northwestern University Press. A former newspaper film critic, he was film curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts from 1998-2005.

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David Walsh: What’s your overall evaluation or response to Marsha Hunt’s life and career? What stands out about her life?

Max Alvarez: Well, the central thing was her involvement with the Committee for the First Amendment in 1947 and then being named in *Red Channels*.

Marsha Hunt was a liberal-minded person who, unlike many so-called left-wingers, stuck by the principle of not cooperating with those who were doing terribly undemocratic things like HUAC and other government agencies. She had these firm ideas about the American system of justice and American institutions, which we have to respect. She saw the witch-hunt as an aberration and thought it was wrong. She refused to cooperate with any of the efforts to make her recant. She could have signed statements, like many others did, and done all kinds of things, and she refused to do that.

DW: It’s interesting, because she was more principled in some ways than a lot of people who had been far more radical in their views, so to speak.

MA: Yes, it’s true. She was one of the last from that era who was still with us. It’s coincidental of course, but she died almost exactly on the 75th anniversary of the beginning of the Hollywood blacklist.

DW: Can you give an overview of her life?

MA: She comes out of Chicago. Her father was an insurance executive and her mother was a former operatic soprano and a vocal coach. She was raised in New York and became a Powers model. John Robert Powers had a modeling agency known for its beautiful women, and Hollywood culled from that agency for its future talent. Joanne Dru came from there, also Janis Carter and Adele Jergens.

One of the disadvantages we have about analyzing the first stage of Hunt's career is that she was under contract to Paramount, she joined them in the late 1930s. Paramount's library is controlled by Universal Pictures and so many of the Paramount films from the 30s and early 40s are impossible to see. They've never been released to home video or DVD.

It would be wonderful to be able to check out the young Marsha Hunt from the late 30s, but that stuff is just not available. I've never seen any of those early films. In *Kid Glove Killer*, she spars well with Van Heflin in Fred Zinnemann's film. I'm not usually a big fan of crime noirs that have comic relief, but their scenes are genuinely charming and funny.

But then two years later we see her in Andre de Toth's *None Shall Escape*, which was written by one of the future members of the Hollywood Ten, Lester Cole. It's promoted or regarded as the only Hollywood movie addressing the Holocaust while the Holocaust was going on, even though it was 1944. Marsha Hunt plays a Polish teacher. This is a film that has the framework of some sort of future tribunal against the Nazi criminals. It anticipates in some fashion the Nuremberg trials.

The film contains a flashback of what was going on in Poland. Alexander Knox, who, grimly, was also going to be a casualty of the blacklist himself, plays a Nazi war criminal who's on trial for war crimes. The film takes place at the end of the war and it is available now on DVD, finally, after being unavailable a long time.

Lester Cole, who is going to be one of the Hollywood Ten members, wrote the screenplay for that film, which was made by Columbia Pictures. Marsha Hunt would consider that one of her finest works. It was a film she was very proud of.

She was also a fan of a film that was made for United Artists called *Carnegie Hall*. She plays an older character. It's kind of clunky, but it's fascinating with the collection of famed musicians and performers. It's director Edgar Ulmer rising to the occasion and dealing with a bigger budget for once.

Hollywood had its prejudice that a woman couldn't be beautiful and funny, but Hunt proves that she had a tremendous skill for humor in a sketch she does, I want to say, with Frank Morgan in *Thousands Cheer* [1943], which she made when she moved over to MGM. She's very funny and has a very natural screen presence. She demonstrates a poise and elegance, even if the films themselves were not worthy of her all the time.

Earlier, *Pride and Prejudice* is another case where she is given a chance to show her comic side, her loonier side. Hunt was very fond of *The Human Comedy*, directed by Clarence Brown, who will later be a presence in the right-wing Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, even though she knew it was a quite sentimental MGM movie. Sentiment doesn't necessarily age well, but it was valuable in its time, she felt.

The Happy Time [Richard Fleischer, 1952] was more of a high-profile picture she made with Charles Boyer, produced by Stanley Kramer's company. There were already problems with her being in that because she was officially not supposed to be hired. Well, nothing's ever official. So they had to apply pressure on the Kramer company to use her in that film because there was one person there, not Stanley Kramer, but another executive, who was not keen on using her. He eventually also had a hand in Carl Foreman being pushed out during *High Noon* [Fred Zinnemann, 1952].

DW: Let's speak for a moment about Anthony Mann's *Raw Deal* because it's a film we both admire.

MA: So *Raw Deal* Marsha Hunt makes during a stopover at Eagle-Lion Films, which is eventually going to be folded into United Artists. It has grown from Poverty Row into a production house that provides second-run movies, bottom halves of double bills.

Eagle-Lion is trying to increase its budgets. Anthony Mann spends a few years there. He makes *T-Men* [1947], he works on *He Walked by Night* [1948] and he directs *Raw Deal*.

DW: That is an impressive trio of films.

MA: It is very, very impressive. Marsha Hunt attended a screening of *Raw Deal*, I believe it was for the Turner Classic Movie film festival. This would have been in the early 2010s, as my book on Mann was being prepared. My research associate attended that screening of *Raw Deal* hosted by Eddie Muller, the "Film Noir Czar," with Marsha Hunt present. She was very funny because they asked her what she thought of the part she played in *Raw Deal*, Ann Martin, and she said, well, she's kind of a goody-two-shoes.

It's true, because her character in *Raw Deal* was a classic example of what the Breen censorship office mandated as "the eloquent voice of morality." Joseph L. Mankiewicz in his movie, I think it was *The Honey Pot* [1967], made a joke about "the eloquent voice of morality" that censors look for.

Here was a case of it. If I remember the censorship memos for *Raw Deal* correctly, they actually were saying that they wanted her to give pious lectures to Dennis O'Keefe as Joe Sullivan about his pursuing crime as a career—he's not the only one who's had it tough, she had it tough too and she wasn't a criminal, etc.

But Ann can't help but fall in love with him and their chemistry, I think, is very strong. Of course, we have Claire Trevor as well, but she has a dark side.

DW: As I recall it though, Hunt's character may start out as a goody-two-shoes, but she ends up falling outrageously, head-over-heels in love with O'Keefe's Joe.

MA: As he does for her. She's visiting him in prison and she's going to be taken hostage by him and Claire eventually, but she can't help her feelings for him. There's a great line in *Raw Deal* when Claire Trevor visits O'Keefe in prison. The Marsha Hunt character has something to do with the law firm handling the case. Claire Trevor says, with a delivery that only Claire Trevor can give, "She was practically sitting on your lap throughout the whole trial."

DW: Let's talk about the Committee for the First Amendment in 1947 and the blacklist.

MA: The Committee was organized in September 1947 in response to the upcoming hearings of HUAC in Washington D.C. It was composed of liberal members of the Hollywood community, people like John Huston, William Wyler, screenwriter Philip Dunne, Sterling Hayden, Danny Kaye, Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, Paul Henreid, Richard Conte and others.

They flew in an airplane to Washington. You'll never guess who donated the airplane. Howard Hughes. How did that happen? I know I'm not going to even try to make sense of that. They fly to D.C. to show their support for the Hollywood Ten. They have not been members of the Communist Party. They have not been members of radical left organizations per se, but they are taking a First Amendment, free speech stand.

Marsha Hunt is part of this group. It's a whistle-stop tour. They're actually appearing in other cities for crowds who clearly want to see the stars. But this is giving these actors a chance to speak out about what HUAC is doing.

Once they get to D.C., they're in the House committee chambers and they see how frightening it is, the yelling and screaming that's going on. Certain historians say they were shocked by how badly the members of the Hollywood Ten were behaving. First of all, HUAC was behaving abominably. The committee was not allowing Ten members to read statements, which they had allowed "friendly witnesses" to read. HUAC was not letting them finish sentences and a few of them got a little irritated by that. But also, I think the Committee for the First Amendment

members suddenly realized this is not a movie. This is the real deal. They just got terrified by it all. They were not prepared for this.

When they left D.C., several were read the riot act by the studios with whom they were under contract. Warner Bros. called Bogart and Bacall on the carpet and said you are not to be associated with this if you want your careers to continue. Bogart famously recanted and wrote his really sad “I’m no communist” article. Huston was furious at Bogart for that and apparently *Key Largo* [1948] picks up on some of the tensions that were taking place.

Many things were going on simultaneously. People like Sterling Hayden caved under the pressure and informed, and then later publicly regretted that. Others seemed not to be affected, like Danny Kaye. John Huston had to make nice with the Motion Picture Alliance people like Ward Bond and John Wayne, but never turned informer.

So what happened to Marsha Hunt is part of the fallout from all that. Three years go by and she’s mentioned in *Red Channels*.

DW: She wasn’t called to testify or name names, I suppose, because everyone knew that she was never in the CP and that she had no names to name.

MA: So she experienced a three-quarters blacklist, because she did make a couple of films, she appeared on television a few times. It was a peculiar gray area.

Red Channels came out in 1950 and it was primarily designed to report on “communist influence” in radio and television, but clearly there’s a spillover to motion pictures.

In her interview in *Tender Comrades*, Hunt said, “They had listed several affiliations under my name—some I’d never heard about, complete lies. One, I think, had me attending a peace conference in Stockholm. I had never been to Stockholm, nor to a peace conference. The rest were innocent activities that *Red Channels* viewed with suspicion. One of these was the movement in the theater to stop a proposed bill in the city legislature to empower a ‘morality czar’ of Broadway with the authority to close any production. The whole theatrical community rose up in protest over that issue, and it was duly reported in the press that I was part of it. The bill was defeated, of course, but that made me ‘suspect’ in the eyes of *Red Channels*. *Red Channels*, I think, was what sealed my fate.”

Actually, what they cite in relation to Marsha Hunt in *Red Channels* is that she signed a petition to the Supreme Court to review the conviction of John Howard Lawson and Dalton Trumbo, two of the members of the Hollywood Ten. As she says, she had also been part of a stop-censorship committee that held a rally at New York’s Hotel Astor in March 1948 to protest censorship on Broadway. She had been part of the Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts, Sciences and Professions, she also signed a petition protesting against the Tenney Committee [a California version of the federal HUAC]. She had spoken as part of the Progressive Citizens of America at a rally against HUAC in honor of the Hollywood Ten held at the Shrine Auditorium on October 16, 1947. And then there was her work for the Committee for the First Amendment. She took part in their broadcast on November 2, 1947. All of this was enough to get her named in *Red Channels* and become *persona non grata*.

DW: Here we are 75 years later. Do you see any indication that the entertainment industry would be any less susceptible to blacklisting and witch-hunting today?

MA: Do I see them as less susceptible? No, I do not. In fact, I think as any reader of the WSWS knows, the entertainment industry hierarchy is more vulnerable now than ever and more acquiescent than ever. We see this in their caving in to the current war propaganda efforts. You and I discussed in 2018 the #MeToo campaign. We took our lives in our hands for that discussion and we survived somehow. That was a case of what you have described as “sexual McCarthyism.” We see how easily the industry acquiesces and, unfortunately, it took these events of the last five years to make me understand, wow, they really do cave under pressure.

What’s particularly chilling is how quickly the industry will acquiesce or alter or adjust its political views depending on the political climate. We see this at film festivals now, as you’ve been covering, we see this at awards ceremonies. They’re “progressives” one year and then flag-wavers the next.

DW: Back to Marsha Hunt for a second. She seems to have been a principled person. She said she wasn’t a Communist and she probably wasn’t, but she didn’t cave in. She made this statement in the 1990s, also cited in *Tender Comrades*: “‘It was a shameful period, demanding conformity, stifling dissent,’ she now says. ‘Young people today don’t believe it happened. This being the fiftieth anniversary of the blacklist, I’ve been asked to do some college lectures. I didn’t want to talk about it before. I wanted to get away from it, not look back. But now I think it’s important for young people to know, to understand the grip of hysteria, and paranoia, that crippled our society, and to guard against it happening again.’”

MA: She was the first to admit that she was an innocent when a lot of this was starting. She was surprised that these things were happening in the United States and felt that they were wrong and one had to speak out against them. A very brave thing to do at a very terrifying time.

DW: Yes, she took democratic rights, free speech, due process seriously.

MA: As she said, as a result, her career never recaptured its momentum. The short-term and long-term impact of the blacklist was devastating. It has never been adequately addressed, or redressed.

DW: We might say that it wasn’t only Hunt’s career that never “recaptured its momentum.” Hollywood as a whole has never recaptured its momentum to the present day. I don’t think the shameful blacklist era will fully be “redressed” until there is a powerful social movement against capitalism and there’s a different artistic mood and the scoundrels who run the industry are tossed out.



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