Directed by Richard Brooks
Written by Richard Brooks
Based on the novel by Sinclair Lewis
Produced by Bernard Smith
Original Music by André Previn
Cinematography by John Alton

Burt Lancaster... Elmer Gantry
Jean Simmons... Sister Sharon Falconer, née Katie Jones
Arthur Kennedy... Jim Lefferts
Dean Jagger... William L. Morgan
Shirley Jones... Lulu Bains
Patti Page... Sister Rachel
Edward Andrews... George F. Babbitt
John McIntire... Rev. John Pengilly
Hugh Marlowe... Rev. Philip Garrison
Joe Maross... Pete
Philip Ober... Rev. Planck
Barry Kelley... Police Capt. Holt
Wendell Holmes... Rev. Ulrich
Dayton Lummis... Mr. Eddington, newspaper publisher
Rex Ingram... Preacher of black congregation

Academy Awards for: Burt Lancaster, Best Actor in a Leading Role; Shirley Jones, Best Actress in a Supporting Role; Richard Brooks, Best Writing, Screenplay Based on Material from Another Medium. Nominated for Best Music, Best Picture.


Won Oscar: Best Actor in a Leading Role- Elmer Gantry (1961); Nominated Oscar: Best Actor in a Leading Role- From Here to Eternity (1954); Nominated Oscar: Best Actor in a Leading Role- Birdman of Alcatraz (1963); Nominated Oscar: Best Actor in a Leading Role- Atlantic City (1982).


SINCLAIR LEWIS
(7 February 1885, Sauk Centre, Minnesota—10 January 1951, Rome, alcoholism) was the first American to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. “His works are known for their insightful and critical views of American society and capitalist values, as well as their strong characterizations of modern working women” (Wikipedia). Some of his better known works are Main Street (1920), Babbitt (1922), Arrowsmith (1925), Elmer Gantry (1935), Dodsworth (1929), It Can’t Happen Here (1935), Cass Timberlane (1945), and Kingsblood Royal (1947). There was an interesting biography of him in 2002, Richard Lingeman’s Sinclair Lewis: Rebel from Main Street, but the classic bio remains Mark Schorer’s Sinclair Lewis; An American Life 1961.

AIMEE SEMPLE MCPHERSON “was the popular traveling evangelist who founded the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. At age 17 she married traveling Pentecostal minister Robert Semple; after his death two years later she remarried and then became an evangelist herself. As her popularity grew she settled in Los Angeles, where she raised money and in 1923 built the 5500-seat Angelus Temple. Her services mixed Jerusalem and Hollywood, with bands, choirs and other crowd-pleasing touches enhancing her dynamic preaching. Radio broadcasts increased her audience and made her a national phenomenon. Public interest peaked when “Sister Aimee” disappeared while swimming near Venice, California on 18 May 1926. After a month of mystery and rumors, she reappeared suddenly in Arizona, claiming to have been kidnapped and held hostage in the Mexican desert. The police clearly doubted McPherson's story but could prove nothing. The incident, along with a later remarriage and divorce, tarnished McPherson's reputation. She continued preaching but was less in the public eye, and died in 1944 while visiting Oakland for the dedication of a new Foursquare church” (Answers.com). She was the model for Sister Sharon Falconer in Sinclair Lewis’s Elmer Gantry and Eli Watkins in Upton Sinclair’s novel Oil! (in There Will Be Blood, the 2007 film based on that novel, the character’s name was changed to Eli Sunday).

American director, scenarist, and producer, was born in Philadelphia, the son of an insurance agent. He was educated at Philadelphia public schools and Temple University, envisaging a career in journalism. Such jobs were hard to come by in the Depression, when Brooks graduated, and it seemed to him that he might as well take a look at the country. He went to Pittsburgh, Kansas City, New Orleans, and Texas, living for a time in each place, and eking out his meager savings by writing on space rates for local papers and at other odd jobs.

Returning home after this American walkabout, Brooks found a job as a sportswriter with the Philadelphia Record. After two years there he joined the Atlantic City Press Union, then moved on to New York to take up a post with the World Telegram. Before he reported for work he landed a better-paying job with Radio WNEW, New York, editing four news broadcasts a day and writing one. This led after a year and a half to an appointment as newswriter, commentator, and announcer with NBC, where he remained until 1940.

Brooks was already attracted to the idea of directing, and in 1940 he and his friend David Loew, later a well-known producer, launched the Mill Pond Theatre in Roslyn, New York, taking turns directing the plays they staged that summer. In October of that same year Brooks went to California on vacation and wound up in Hollywood—not as a filmmaker but as a writer for a local radio station. For a year he wrote a short story almost every day and read it over the air. At length, finding that he was beginning to repeat himself, he decided to try his hand as a screenwriter. In 1942 he provided additional dialogue for a Jon Hall drama called White Savage but this failed to ring any bells (let alone open any doors) and Brooks returned to radio writing— including some parts for Orson Welles—until the spring of 1943, when he joined the US Marine Corps.

During his three years in the Marines, Brooks wrote his first novel, The Brick Foxhole (1945), a tough thriller in which a group of bored and frustrated enlisted men, away from combat, became involved in the murder of a homosexual. Since homosexuality was not then an acceptable Hollywood theme, the story was transformed by scenarist John Paxton into a study of anti-Semitism in the armed forces and filmed by Edward Dmytryk as Crossfire (1947), one of the first American dramas about prejudice, and a very powerful and intelligent one.
Brooks had not abandoned his ambition to write for the movies himself. While still in the Marines he contributed to the scripts of Anthony Mann’s My Best Gal (1944) and Robert Siodmak’s Cobra Woman (1945), and after the war he began to emerge as one of Hollywood’s best realist writers, scripting Jules Dassin’s Brute Force (1947) and working on the stories of Robert Siodmak’s The Killers (1946) and Dassin’s Naked City (1948). All three were produced by Mark Hellinger, whom Brooks admired and who provided the model for the hero of Brooks’ 1951 novel, The Producer. Other scripts that he wrote or co-authored at this time included Frank Tuttle’s Swell Guy (1947), Delmer Daves’ To the Victor (1948), Mervyn LeRoy’s Any Number Can Play (1949), John Sturges’ Mystery Street (1950), and Stuart Heisler’s Storm Warning (1950).

Brooks’ first film as a director was Crisis (MGM, 1950), adapted by the director from a George Tabori story. It deals with a famous brain surgeon (Cary Grant) who is kidnapped to an imaginary Latin American country to reside in the dialogue,” though Brooks Lambert called it “predominantly a turgid comedy about skulduggery in the art world, inappropriately called Deadline USA (MGM, 1951), and then Deadline USA (1952), made for 20th Century-Fox. The latter has Humphrey Bogart as a crusading newspaper editor who struggles to expose a powerful racketeer (Martin Gabel) and at the same time prevent his publishing heirs from selling the paper to a rival, who will close it down. Cheered on by the publisher’s tough old widow (Ethel Barrymore), Bogart gets the story out—the fate of the newspaper is not resolved. Kim Hunter plays the ex-wife that the hero still pines for. Most critics found Deadline USA a strong and exciting drama, unusually authentic in its portrayal of the newspaper background but somewhat marred by preaching about the importance of a free and independent press.

Back at MGM where he remained for the next ten years, Brooks found himself bogged down for a time in a series of glib and synthetic studio assignments. Battle Circus (1953), with Bogart and June Allyson, billed as “a story of the indomitable human spirit,” seemed to one reviewer an “unconvincing mixture of love, war, and studio heroics.” At least Battle Circus was made from Brooks’ own script, like its predecessors; his next three films were not, and were consequently even less personal—another war movie called Take the High Ground (1953); a Lana Turner weepie, The Flame and the Flesh (1954), which even Brooks calls “a terrible movie”; and The Last Time I Saw Paris (1954), a disappointingly sentimental adaptation of Scott Fitzgerald’s story “Babylon Revisited,” with Elizabeth Taylor and Van Johnson.

Brooks’ first real success was The Blackboard Jungle (1955), which he adapted from Evan Hunter’s novel about a schoolteacher, Richard Didier (Glenn Ford), in a New York slum and his struggle to communicate with his hostile pupils (and indeed to survive). It shocked contemporary audiences with its revelations of teenage violence, sexuality, and racial antagonism, and was widely discussed. It was this film that established Sidney Poitier as a major new screen personality, and Bill Haley’s “Rock Around the Clock,” played over the credits, virtually introduced rock ‘n roll to the screen. ....

An interesting ecological Western followed, The Last Hunt (1955), again with a Brooks script (from the novel by Milton Loft). Robert Taylor plays Charlie Gilson, a buffalo hunter in South Dakota at the end of the nineteenth century, when the great herds on which the Indians depended for survival had already been wiped out by greedy white men. A perverse, half-heroic anachronism, Gilson seems determined to massacre the few thousand head that remain, in spite of the efforts of his right-minded friend Sandy (Stewart Granger), and dies in the attempt. Some critics regard this as one of Brooks’ finest films, but the scenes of slaughter (filmed during the annual cull of the surviving buffalo herds) were too “authentically gory” for public acceptance. Brooks says that “the intention of the film was to make the public so sick [of hunting] that they would say that it was a crime. But they got so sick they never went to see the picture. It was a financial disaster.”

In a startling display of versatility, Brooks then switched from the endless plains and elemental emotions of The Last Hunt to an almost Dickensian portrait of contemporary family life in the Bronx. In A Catered Affair (1956), adapted by Gore Vidal from Paddy Chayefsky’s television play, a Catholic girl (Debbie Reynolds), daughter of a taxi driver (Ernest Borgnine), announces that she and her schoolteacher fiancé want a quick, quiet wedding. The neighbors assume (wrongly) that she is pregnant, and her mother, partly for this reason and partly because her own married life has been unremittingly drab, decides that, on the contrary, the wedding will be the most ostentatious and elaborate that money can buy—even if it costs every penny her husband has saved towards a cab of his own. Bette Davis gives a tour-de-force performance as the mother, and the movie seemed to Isabel Quigley “ a small and satisfying masterpiece....Heart-warming without sentimentality, at once funny and persuasive, lyrical (at times), yet refreshingly down-to-earth.”
Scarcely pausing for breath, Brooks was off to the wide open spaces again (albeit African ones) for his adaptation of Robert Ruark’s Mau-Mau novel, *Something of Value*. A number of Brooks’ movies (including *The Last Hunt*) explore the relationship between two men who are drawn to each other emotionally but divided ideologically; the sympathy that develops between a black man (Sidney Poitier) and a white (Rock Hudson) in *Something of Value* is the most interesting aspect of an otherwise meretricious film.

Richard Brooks, who is nothing if not ambitious, then attempted an adaptation of Dostoyevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, reducing that large and complex work to a movie of just under two and a half hours. Brooks’ screenplay concentrates on the most obviously dramatic elements in the book—the murder of the rich and libidinous Fyodor Karamazov (Lee J. Cobb) and the love affairs of his wild son Dimitri (Yul Brynner) with the chilly Katya (Claire Bloom) and the prostitute Grushenka (Maria Schell). The other brothers—Ivan (Richard Basehart) and Alexei (William Shatner)—who in the novel are the chief spokesmen for Dostoevsky’s philosophical and religious ideas and agonies, play only minor parts in the movie.

“What is lost,” wrote C.A. Lejeune, “is just the world that Dostoevsky wrote about, a world of violence enlaced with mysticism…. What remains is a murder story in bizarre settings, with more respect than understanding for classical style…. *The Brothers Karamazov* is not a bad film really. It tries to do what it has to do without deliberate uglification. It isn’t obstreperously noisy, its dialogue is not inordinately foolish, and I don’t suppose that anybody stopped for a minute to consider that the colour effect was vile.”

C. A. Lejeune was wrong to suppose that the film’s color effects were accidental. In fact Brooks, with his cinematographer John Alton, had set out to use strong primary colors to symbolize particular states of mind, hoping in this way to evoke some of the moods and passions that could not be accommodated in the dialogue. The experiment failed, and as Paul Mayersberg says, “the result is a strange split between words and images. The colours stand out like shouted phrases or subtitles.” Nevertheless, Mayersberg maintains that this purely visual device marks “the turning point in Brooks’ development” from a writer into a true filmmaker.

A series of adaptations followed of more or less estimable literary works, all of them scripted by Brooks alone except his version of Tennessee Williams’ play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958), which he wrote in collaboration with James Poe…. In this, Elizabeth Taylor gives one of her better performances as Maggie. Paul Newman is her husband Brick, a latent homosexual who would rather booze than confront his condition, and Burl Ives plays the terrifying patriarch Big Daddy, who develops confrontation problems of his own when he learns that he is terminally ill….

Brooks established his own production company to make his version of Sinclair Lewis’ novel *Elmer Gantry*, perhaps the most widely admired of his films. Burt Lancaster is likely….
in the forties... The whiplash documentary style of much of the photography clashes with the tired German Expressionism of dreams and hallucinations, and the mixture is a bit dishonest besides, in that it places an aura of subjectivity around the killers and around no one else.”

After The Happy Ending (1969), in which Jean Simmons plays a woman who takes a vacation alone to reassess her sixteen-year-old marriage, came two genre films, $ (Dollars. The Heist, 1971), an overlong but generally enjoyable caper movie starring Warren Beatty and Goldie Hawn, and Bite the Bullet (1975), a Western in which Gene Hackman, James Coburn, Ben Johnson, Ian Bannen and others compete in a seven-hundred-mile horserace...

Nor was there great enthusiasm for Brooks’ adaptation of Looking for Mr. Goodbar, though most critics like Diane Keaton’s performance as Terry Dunn, the gifted young teacher whose growing addiction to the rough sexual trade of singles bars ends in a squallid, strobe-light room with her murder by a bisexual psychopath (Richard Gere)... Wrong is Right (1982), a black comedy with Sean Connery as a globetrotting TV newscaster, flailed away at an assortment of targets, including Arab terrorism and CIA skullduggery, with more heat than wit....

A highly uneven director, Brooks is responsible for two or three excellent films (A Catered Affair, Elmer Gantry), a string of intelligent entertainments, and several brave and interesting failures—a creditable record that should earn him more respect than often comes his way. The critical hostility to his work is due partly to what is seen as his effrontery in tackling subjects (like The Brick Foxhole) that are beyond his range, partly to his habit of larding his scripts with sermons in favor of free speech or against capital punishment, hunting, etc. Paul Mayersberg, who in 1965 described him as “arguably the best screenwriter in America,” calls Brooks “an idealist, but a conservative idealist... in the sense that his beliefs are reasoned not inspired. His attitudes are evolutionary and not utopian....I can’t help feeling that Brooks sees the world divided into teachers and the taught, the leaders and the followers.” Bob Blake thinks him an artist “whose deepest instinct is to improve...[his] audience...but whose whole training and background is in the field of super-slick entertainment.”


...Three years in the marines during World War II interrupted his writing, but gave him a chance to learn editing with Frank Capra on the Why We Fight series. His service experience inspired a novel, The Brick Foxhole, which was made into the film Crossfire, in 1947.

Working as a writer of B pictures after the war, Brooks seized the opportunity to collaborate with John Huston on the script of Key Largo. By now the young writer saw that directing was where the action was, and he asked Huston how to become a director. “If you’ve got a script,” Huston said, “don’t give it to the studios unless they let you direct it.” Brooks did exactly that in 1950 with Crisis, starring Cary Grant. This was at MGM, where they kept directors in the bullpen who could come in at a moment’s notice and replace directors who fell behind schedule. Brooks had his eyes fixed on the actors’ performances one day when a heavy camera dolly ran over his foot. He called for a second take, and his leading man said, “Take two? You’ve got a shoe full of blood!” “Cary,” Brooks said, “if I leave this stage, there’ll be another director here in five minutes to finish the picture—they didn’t want me to direct it in the first place.” “Really?” Grant said. “Then I’ll go to the hospital with you.”

Thus Brooks survived his first picture. He claimed that Louis B. Mayer told him that he never liked any movie Brooks made but figured that something new was coming and that Brooks might be it....

Brooks soon became his own producer. His films were eclectic and wide ranging, adapted from the work of such authors as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Joseph Conrad, Sinclair Lewis, Robert Ruark, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote and Judith Rossner. The resulting string of solid studio pictures earned Brooks eight Oscar nominations for screenwriting: The Brothers Karamazov, Lord Jim, Elmer Gantry, Something of Value, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Sweet Bird of Youth, In Cold Blood and Looking for Mr. Goodbar.

Brooks was cantankerous and irascible. Peter O’Toole, who worked with Brooks on Lord Jim, called him “the man who lived at the top of his voice.”

May 25, 1977

You started out as a screenwriter. How did you move into directing?

The way it happened with me was that I was at Warner Bros. and Jerry Wald was one of the big producers there. He had a lot of pictures under way, though that doesn’t mean that he was going to make them all. One day he said that he had a great idea to make a movie called Key Largo, based on a play—I think with Paul Muni—which was about the Spanish Civil War. John Huston wanted to direct it and Humphrey Bogart wanted to be in it. Jerry Wald asked me if I would rewrite the script. I said, “I’d be delighted.”...

You certainly haven’t avoided difficult material. But can anything—even the presence of Truman Capote—compare with Elmer Gantry?

Elmer Gantry was very difficult to make. I had written a book during the war called The Brick Foxhole. When the book came out in 1945, Sinclair Lewis, who wrote reviews for Esquire magazine, wrote a very complimentary review, and I wrote him a letter thanking him. He wrote back and asked me, if I got into New York, to give him a call. I did, and we met at the Astor Bar. I told him how much I liked his books and how I was influenced by him, and I said, “One of your books I’d like to do as a movie.” He said, “What title?” I said “Elmer Gantry.” He said, “Hmmm, if you’re going to do it, read all the book reviews that were written about it and you will find that some of them are pretty good, especially some of those that criticize the book. If you compile all of those and think about them, maybe you will find a way to do it that will make a movie.” Then he said, “I like movies but they get too diverse, and they get frightened of the book. Don’t be frightened by the book.”

I finally took an option on the book but no studio would make it. They said it wasn’t about a guy who sang and wanted to...
get baseball shirts for the church team. It also wasn’t about a Protestant minister and a leaking roof, and if he could raise enough money, everything would turn out all right. It was about everyday religion, and movies didn’t make stories about that. Not American movies. So nobody would make it. Besides, the Masons said they would have the picture blacklisted throughout the world because of Babbitt and because Gantry was a Protestant. The Catholics wanted the picture made. The Protestants didn’t want it made.

Frank Freeman, who was executive vice president of Paramount, wrote a letter to the head of Columbia and said, “Why don’t you give him the money he put up for the book and tell him not to make the movie? Fist of all, it won’t make any money. Its going to be a disaster. Second of all, they’re going to ban it.” But we had Jean Simmons and Burt Lancaster who wanted to make the picture, and we decided to go ahead anyway. That we kept the shooting going for the seventy-six or seventy-eight days is a tribute to the people who worked on the picture, because it was very difficult to do.

What were the problems?
For example, we needed extra money to do the interior fire sequence. I looked at all the films I could find dealing with fires, trying to learn. How do you make a fire? How do you shoot a fire scene? I found out something interesting. No pictures had been made up till then, 1959, with mass scene interior fires. Either it was an outside fire or the camera was outside. In Rebecca, as I remember, a woman ran by the window and that was that, but the camera was outside. I couldn’t find out how the hell you shoot a fire sequence. And how do you shoot nine hundred people in a riot? The budget for the fire was for six days. Thank God Burt Lancaster was one of the stars. He went to United Artists and said, “Brooks says he can’t do it in six days.” They said, “How long would it take?” “He doesn’t know.” They said, “How much money do you think it’s going to take?” “It might take an extra two hundred thousand.” They said, “Two hundred thousand dollars for a fire?” “Yes, maybe more.” They said, “Well, will you and he take it out of your fees?” We agreed to do that, so they advanced the money. It took us five to six weeks to shoot that fire.

We shot partly on the studio back lot, where we had to have forty Los Angeles firemen and the sprinklers and everything else, and partly out at the Santa Monica Pier. Furthermore, we had to stop and start the fire over and over again. It was supposed to be a flash fire. Somebody throws a cigar or something into an oilcan and all the bunting and all of the banners—GOD IS LOVE and WE’LL BE SAVED—were supposed to go whoosh, and the fire was on.

We had a thousand people and two cameras and Miss Simmons out there in a white robe. I said, “Roll ‘em/ Action.” Everybody started acting. The cameras were going. No fire. Nothing. Which, of course, didn’t leave me pacified. When they scraped me off the ceiling, I said, “What’s going on here? Where’s the fire?” The special effects guy came around and said, “I don’t know. I pressed the button.” I said, “It’s no good that you don’t know; it could be dangerous. Do you know what you’re doing?” Somebody said, “Oh yes, he’s been around a long time.” That’s scary right away. When somebody says, “I’ve been in the business twenty-five years—let me see the dailies,” be wary. My father drove for twenty-seven years and was a lousy driver till he died.

So we got ready again, and with great trepidation I said, “Action.” Everyone started to act, we rolled and nothing happened. The special effects man came round again and said, “I talked to the firemen. They soaked the bunting and the drapes and all the paper. They can’t burn.” I went to a fireman and said, “Did you do that?” He said, “Yes, we have to do that. Supposing the building burns down?” I said, “Let it burn! The studio would love to see it burn down. It’s insured.” He said, “Well, we’re paid to see that there are no fires, not by the studio but by the insurance company.” I said, “Let’s call a halt for a while. Miss Simmons, go to your dressing room. Mr. Lancaster, go eat.”

I called one of the firemen and said, “Let’s go for a walk.” I said, “How do you start a fire?” He said, “I’m a fireman. How the hell would I know how to start a fire?” I said, “Why aren’t you a policeman? You don’t become a fireman just because you decide to be a fireman. You’re a fireman because you’re attracted to fire. So how do you do it? He said, “Only one way. You get yourself some old nitrate film and lay it on that stuff there. That’ll go.” So we went to Columbia and bought fifty or sixty cans of film. They went down into the vault where all the rats are—you know, they never took care of their pictures. They had their negatives and prints down there, but you’d open a can and most of it would be dust. It wasn’t even film anymore. So we laid the film along the streamers, everywhere. After lunch, we called out Miss Simmons, Mr. Lancaster and the nine hundred people. She came onstage and everybody was ready. The camera started going, the button was hit and that fucking fire went whoosh across the room. It burned like a bastard—it was really terrific. The stunt people were marvelous. I really don’t know why they trusted us. It’s about four and a half minutes of film on the screen. It was worth it.

Is it true that your ending for Elmer Gantry was changed?
Yes, there were four or five words we had to throw out. There was no rating board at that time, but there was the Legion of Decency, which operated out of New York. It could give you a rating that would ban the picture for Catholics. The Legion of Decency loved the picture, but they said, “We have a problem. Can you come to New York?” I went to New York. “You have to take out these few last words.” “Why?” “Well, we think that it would be perhaps irreligious for you to say that.” I said, “I don’t see how.” Three days we talked about it. They asked, “What is your intention? What do you really mean by it?” It was almost like a school of the Talmud and the Jesuits put together, and that’s quite a combination. The discussions went on endlessly.

Finally, United Artists settled it. They said, “We’ve got to get the picture out. Fuck these three words. Take them out. What difference does it make?” I said to Burt Lancaster, “What about it?” He said, “Does it make that much difference?” I said, “If it didn’t make that much difference why are they arguing so long?” Well,
we lost the few words. The few words were these. At the end of the picture Gantry is leaving. Jean’s character has died in the fire, and the people feel guilty. They say, “We hope that Sister Sharon will forgive us.” He says, “I’m sure she will forgive you;” and he begins to sing, and everybody joins in. He walks off to go back to being a salesman where he can drink and not have to hide it. The reporter looks at him and says, “See you around, brother.” That’s the end now. What’s missing is that Gantry stopped, looked back and said, “I’ll see you in hell, brother.” He knew where he was going. The Legion would not accept the words. They said, “That means that he knows that he did wrong, and if he knows that he did wrong there’s no less.” I couldn’t convince them and they couldn’t convince me. But United Artists convinced both of us. The Masons tried to have the film banned, and I’say that in half of the world the picture has yet to play and probably never will play. Jean Simmons and I went to Jakarta—I was looking for locations—and there was a mob waiting for us there. From the plane it looked like a couple of thousand people, and I thought, “I’d better have a speech ready.” So I tried to think of what I was going to say, and how to address the people and so forth, and we got off the plane and I hear a chant that goes up from these thousands of people, “Miss Simmons, Miss Simmons.” They didn’t know who the fuck I was. They’d never heard of me, didn’t even know I was on the plane. As a matter of fact, most of my pictures are banned there. Sukarno the president of Indonesia asked, “You made a picture that got some Academy Awards?” I said, “Yes.” Then he talked to a woman who was on his censor board and asked, “Why have we not seen this picture?” She said something to him, and he said, “Ah! Religious questions. Very serious. Not show it in this country.” I said, “Why not? You’ve got a hundred million people here. Ninety-seven million of them are Muslims. What’s it got to do with you if the film’s about Catholics or Protestants?” He said both groups would protest, so the film never played there.

Could you talk a little bit about Jean Simmon’s role in the film?
Jean had a difficult time because she had the most thankless role in the film. She was the only straight line in the story, the only one who actually believed. She knew exactly where she stood, and I had to balance the other characters off her. Gantry was on one side, Arthur Kennedy—who played the reporter—was on the other; and the church was on another side still. Because of this, all the other characters seemed to be much more colorful than her, and the audiences remember the other roles more. In one scene, she had to address an assembly where the students were rioting and poking fun at her, and she had to come out and try to stop them because Gantry couldn’t do it. They were pretty rough, and she would begin by paraphrasing a segment of Ecclesiastes. I think the beginning was “Dearest God,” and she had a little problem saying that. I said, “You’re starting off in the wrong way. It sounds like you’re writing a letter. You’re probably the only person here who actually believes. Is there anything that you, Jean, really believe in? Do you go to church? Do you believe in God? Is there anyone you really feel in the form of God, or close to it?” She said, “Well, my father. He was a wonderful man.” I said “Do you see him? Do you talk to him?” She said, “No, he’s dead. He died when I was about sixteen.” “And you loved him very much?” “Yes, I still do.” I said, “Well, when you go out there, why don’t you address yourself to him?” That’s all she needed and she was just fine. ...

But you don’t cast in your mind while you’re working on a script?
I think then you’ll bend your story toward someone who has already established a character on the screen. It would be better if you didn’t. I think it’s better if you write the character, and if the actor is good enough, he will try to play that role. It’s the reason I don’t give most of the cast the script. It’s not because I don’t like them. As a matter if fact, I feel very tender and in awe of my cast. They’re doing something I can’t do. I can’t act. They can, and it’s the toughest kind of acting there is in the world. It’s much more difficult than on the stage because on the stage you have a chance to build a character from beginning to end in three hours….But in film you shoot for twenty seconds, thirty seconds, maybe a minute, maybe two minutes.

The reason I don’t give most of the cast the script is this: if they know the entire story, if they know where their character is going, they’re likely to play one thing when they’re supposed to be playing something else. They’re playing the end before the beginning, and the middle before the end. You never shoot in continuity because the cost is prohibitive. So very often the actor doesn’t know where the beginning or the end is. But if he’s read it all, he’s liable to play the whole thing all the time. There’s no progression to his character....

Your emphasis is always on the actor.
You shouldn’t be aware of the director. If anybody at any time says, “Wow, what a shot,” then you’ve lost the audience. They should never know there’s a director in it. They should never know where the music starts or ends. They should never see the camera move. They should never have to say, “Isn’t that interesting?” They should be lost in the story. That’s all you’re telling them. That’s where the camera is....

Do you have any advice for our students here?
You’re going to make mistakes. You’re going to make them every time. Now, I hope you won’t make the same ones every time. Once you try to repeat your previous success—if you’re lucky enough to have one—you’re going to have trouble. If you’re worried about failing, you ought to get into a different business, because statistics will tell you that sixty or seventy percent of the time you’re going to fail. By fail I mean that it won’t make money. Just do the best you can every time. And if you’re going to stay in movies, and you like movies—and I love them—you better love them a lot, because it’s going to take all your time. If you want to be in movies, it’s going to break your heart.
Richard adored John Huston, who was writing for Hellinger—uncredited—at the same time Richard was. He may have patterned himself a little bit after Huston, but I suspect there was a natural affinity between them—literate men’s men that they were, and dramatic speakers, and adventurers. Huston invited him to cowrite Key Largo, taking him along to the eponymous island for mood’s sake, then, according to Richard, parking himself on the dock with a fishing pole while Richard toiled at his portable, rewriting until his friend grudgingly approved the day’s scene. Knowing Richard’s ambition to direct, Huston also brought him onto his set so he could learn how to manage a production. The cinematographer was the distinguished Karl Freund, who one day pressed a couple of reels of 16mm film on Richard. Freund too knew of Richard’s directorial aspirations, and said he thought these shorts, which he had directed in Germany, would aid in his education. Richard ran them that night and discovered they were pornographic. The next day he returned them to the cameraman, complimented him on their lighting, but wondered what lesson he should take from them. “Get to the fucking point,” Freund replied. “To this day, when I line up a shot,” Richard would say when he recounted the anecdote, “those words come back to me.”
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