

# THE HORROR OF THE HOLLYWOOD BLACKLIST CHANGED NOT ONLY AMERICAN FILM, BUT ALSO AMERICAN SOCIETY, FOREVER.

Jez Conolly takes a look at one actor who made a stand against it; Lionel Stander.

Photographs kindly supplied by Bella Stander



TO A GENERATION OF TV VIEWERS he was instantly recognizable as Max, craggy chauffeur to Jonathan and Jennifer in the super-cheesy 1980s' series *Hart to Hart*. When not grooming the family dog, Freeway, Max was to be heard declaring of his employers: 'When they met – it was *moider!*' But over 30 years earlier Lionel Stander's career had taken a sudden left turn, and this resulted in a fateful appointment before the members of the House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

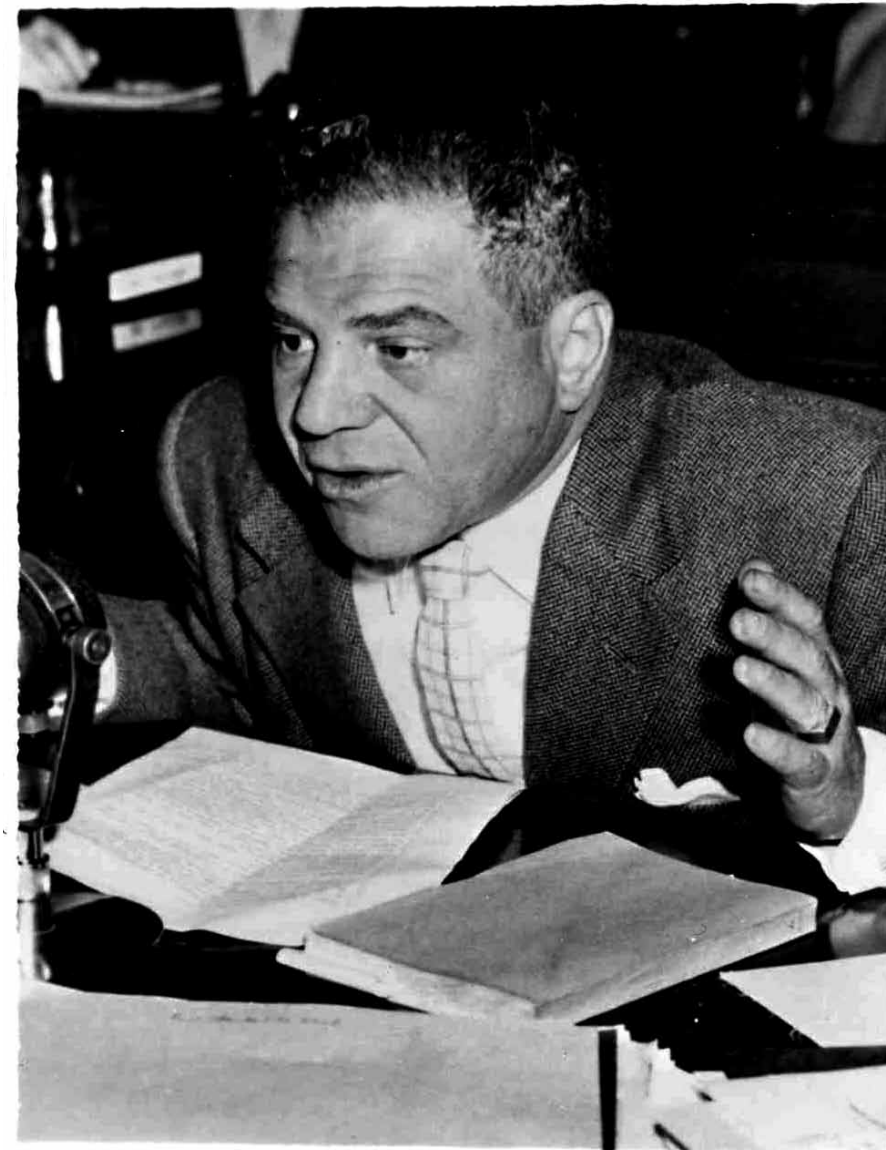
The HUAC was a congressional committee that held hearings on the film and entertainment industries on numerous occasions between 1938 and 1958. One product of this McCarthy-era ministry was the now infamous Hollywood Blacklist (born on 25 November 1947 when ten writers and directors, soon to become known as 'the Hollywood Ten', were cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to answer questions →

(RIGHT) LIONEL STANDER ATTENDS THE HUAC HEARINGS (1953)

put to them by HUAC members). Propelled by rampant and hysterical fears about communism's increasing influence in Hollywood, over 300 industry personnel were denied employment because of their suspected political beliefs and/or social associations.

Stander was certainly active in leftist politics, but never officially a member of the communist party. Among his many extra-curricular activities, he was an organizer of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), a member of the Hollywood Anti-Fascist League and a supporter of the activist Conference of Studio Unions (CSU) in its fight against the Mafia-controlled International Alliance of Stage Employees. Stander had felt the heat from the HUAC as early as 1940, when he began to have difficulty finding work because of his outspoken views. Prior to this he had enjoyed a successful early career, working with the likes of Frank Capra and Preston Sturges.

The HUAC's struggle to present concrete examples of subversion was illustrated by their citing of Stander whistling the 'Internationale' while waiting for an elevator in *No Time to Marry* (Harry Lachman, 1938). After three years without work he took the opportunity to make ten films between 1943 and 1946, when the HUAC was inactive because of the war, but its resurgence, and establishment of the blacklist, brought Stander back into radar range of the committee. In a hearing dated 21 March 1951, the actor Larry Parks, one of the committee's so-called 'friendly witnesses', gave Stander's name under questioning. Although no further accusation was made against him during the hearing, Stander, who had worked consistently on television shows in the months before Parks' testimony, again fell from favour within the industry.



'Here was a man prepared to display courage and no small measure of theatrical ability in his disparaging of the committee.'

At a further hearing in April 1951, actor and known communist sympathizer Marc Lawrence named Stander as a member of his Hollywood communist cell, testifying that Stander 'was the guy who introduced me to the party line'. Upon hearing of this, Stander sued Lawrence for slander, and contacted HUAC chairman John S. Wood to request an opportunity to appear before the committee and swear under oath that he was not a communist.

Over two years later, on 6 May 1953, Stander finally had his moment in front of the committee. His appearance marked a turning point in the hearings: here was a man →



prepared to display courage and no small measure of theatrical ability to disparage the committee. He began by pledging his full support in the fight against 'subversive' activities and went on to tell his inquisitors:

'I know of a group of fanatics who are desperately trying to undermine the Constitution of the United States by depriving artists and others of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness without process of law ... and these people are engaged in the conspiracy, outside all the legal processes, to undermine our very fundamental American concepts upon which our entire system of jurisprudence exists.'

Stander was, of course, referring to the HUAC itself.

In an interview (*for Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist*, by Patrick McGilligan and Paul Buhle) conducted just before his death in 1994, Stander explained why he took the brave decision to come out fighting:

'I decided that when I appeared before the Committee I would expose them as being the un-Americans ... I defied the Committee, using every constitutional amendment there was to keep them from shutting me up ... I attacked them as being part of a conspiracy to impose censorship on American theater and film, because as soon as you tell people who they can't and won't hire, you also tell them what they can and can't present. That was my line, and I got away with it.'

After the hearing, Stander was mobbed by reporters and the next day he was on the front page of every major US newspaper. He was a hero to many people for his courageous stand, but anti-communists hated him all the more. He may have made an impact that day, but to say he 'got away with it' is far from the case. His screen-acting career went into free fall. For the rest of the decade he worked as a stockbroker on Wall Street, a journeyman stage actor, a corporate spokesman, even a New Orleans Mardi Gras king. He didn't return to Broadway until 1961 and to film until 1963, in Larry Moyer's low-budget beatnik picture *The Moving Finger*.

Around this time he struck up a working relationship with Tony Richardson, for whom he provided numerous stage performances. In 1966 Roman Polanski cast Stander in his only starring role, as the thug Dickie in *Cul-de-sac*, opposite Françoise Dorléac and Donald Pleasence. Stander stayed in Europe and eventually settled in Rome, where he appeared in many spaghetti westerns, most notably playing a bartender named Max in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West* (1968). While in Rome Stander befriended Robert Wagner, and it was this acquaintance that led to the TV role with which Stander became most associated: a role that marked his return to the American mainstream. **[tbp]**



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