FIGHTING JUVENILE PREJUDICE IN FILM: THE MAKING OF *HOUSE I LIVE IN*

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At a working Hollywood dinner party held shortly before the surrender of the German armies in early May 1945, four progressives brainstormed about making a movie short for young Americans on the democratic significance of the war while its lessons were still timely. One of the reformers present that evening was Frank Sinatra, the bobbysocks singing idol who also spent the war years giving Four Freedom talks to his teenage fans. The other three were Frank Ross, an RKO producer with humanitarian sentiments, Albert Maltz, a screenwriter with unreconstructed Marxist views, and Mervyn LeRoy, a veteran director of social problem films that had inspired Sinatra as a boy[1]. Now they would collaborate in using the screen to motivate youth to live up to the principles their brothers and fathers were fighting for overseas. The twelve minute educational film that quickly materialized from their brainstorming session and soon found its way to juvenile delinquent agencies and into social studies classrooms was **House I Live In.** It was progressive Hollywood's first lesson for American teenagers on the perils facing social democracy in the postwar era.

Representative of the anti-fascist popular film front that helped to awaken democratic action against foreign enemies in their feature movies, the foursome now turned to educational film to continue the anti-fascist struggle in America. The first stage of their mission was to reach young Americans with their message in a movie short they made almost overnight. A mood of urgency enveloped the makers of **House I Live In.** Rising teenage bigotry threatened to nullify democratic practices that the war against Germany and Japan had produced and that progressives wanted to advance in the domestic phase of the anti-fascist battles they envisioned during the postwar years.

In the wake of the German surrender and the unfinished war against Japan, America faced a social crisis among youth comparable to the national emergency of the early war years. Young Americans seemed as unprepared to overcome latent prejudices as their older peers were unready to fight the foreign enemies of democracy. Film was the proven weapon for both wars. It had successfully trained young soldiers in how to wage combat abroad and how to fight as a democratic team[2]. Progressives would now use the screen to project lessons for combating fascist behavior on the homefront. **House** therefore marked the beginning of fighting juvenile prejudice with film before domestic intolerance delayed the victory over Japan and nullified the moral significance of the defeat of Germany.

Unlike the overseas war against fascism, however, Hollywood's 1945 battle against its equivalent at home was a limited one. Not all the domestic foes of democracy were attacked. Mesmerized by the overriding wartime danger of Nazi Germany and its distinctive evil of anti-Semitism, the anti-fascist coalition that produced **House I Live In** worked under what Maltz later described as «the dark cloud of the Nazi epoch»[3]. Hitlerism had both seared their conscience and discredited Nazism in the nation at large. **House** therefore depicts Sinatra's imaginary encounter with a group of young, incipient American Nazis he finds beating up a boy of a minority religion in an alley. At first the religion goes unnamed, but not the attackers, whom the liberal interventionist calls «Nazi werewolves». Nipping Nazism in the bud overrides confronting American youth with their fuller fascist behavior. **House** consequently becomes a religious tolerance film rather than a full-scale attack on prejudice. Black victims of American racism go unmentioned in the selective progressive attack on intolerance.

The German menace had traumatized film progressives and served as the most compelling lesson for young Americans in their democratic education. Before the cheering over Germany's defeat began, the makers of **House** were impelled to remind democratic laggards of the somber warning of the early Nazi era and the continuing war in Asia. Although the German armies were vanquished, the progressive fear of Nazism lingered. It was if a disease had survived. The lapse in the reformist instruction of adolescents derived as much from the expansive, virulent and contagious virus of Nazism as it did from homegrown fascism. Therefore, before juveniles could be fully treated for their democratic illness, they required a special inoculation against the German disease. **House I Live In** was the first democratic vaccination.

Progressives knew that fuller doses of anti-fascism were necessary if they were to remove the pestilence of racism. The warning signs were clear and ominous, perhaps so dangerously present that the makers of **House** diluted their message for fear a stronger dosage would cause a fundamental breakdown of the social fabric. Government social scientists had found a malproportionate number of young participants in the convulsive 1943 race riot in Detroit and in a growing number of racial brushfires elsewhere. Among them was the resistance of white students to the racial integration of schools in northern cities. The great wartime black migration was nationalizing the country's racial problem rather than resolving it. Anti-Semitism was also increasing and less explosive expressions of ethnic and class divisions endangered the democratic social structure. Across the nation, the growth of high school fraternities and sororities based on social background attested to emerging teenage tribalism. The most disturbing phenomenon among youth, however,was the rise of juvenile delinquency that resembled Nazi hoodlumism of the early 1930s. Lawless teenage populism threatened to supplant the democratic teamwork that the war abroad had fostered[4].

These ominous storm warnings appeared in the growth of gangs that exhibited violent patterns similar to those that occurred in prewar Nazi Germany. Social analysts

attributed this disorder to rising divorce rates, high youth unemployment and school dropout increases.Whatever the underlying cause of rising teenage lawlessness and tribalism, progressives were most alarmed by the anti-democratic consequences of proliferating gangs. One published report concluded that the «disease of scapegoating» was rampant among young hoodlums. «Intergroup intolerance,» akin to «Nazism and fascism,» was producing «spasms of hate» against both racial and religious minorities[5]. A parallel with Germany in the 1930s aroused the fears of the makers of **House I Live In**. It provided them with a compelling film subject.

Its star, Sinatra, knew from first hand experience that American youth needed a lesson in tolerance. A victim of anti-Italian prejudice while growing up in New Jersey in the 1930s, the young singer had become a champion of Franklin D. Roosevelt's. Four Freedom wartime goals. He had also read the pioneering literature that refuted the pseudo-scientific underpinnings of racism and that called for a resolution of the nations racial predicament. He passed on the lessons he learned to adoring youth in mass rallies on democratic universalism, in radio programs, and in more focused missions to high schools experiencing interracial turmoil. By the spring of 1945, Sinatra's multiplying appeals to teenagers for social democracy had become for him a *cause celebre* [6].

A chance meeting on a train with the Hollywood director whose films had first stirred Sinatra's conscience, Mervyn LeRoy, provided an answer to both the nation's democratic dilemma and the rising Hollywood star's personal one. A short film addressing the juvenile social crisis would give Sinatra some relief from his peripatetic missions and also reach a larger audience with his message.The seeds for **House I Live In** thus began on a train to Los Angeles.The vocal entertainer and novice to Hollywood recalled the formative influence on his social philosophy of LeRoy's early 1930s' films, **Little Caesar** and **I am Fugitive From a Chain Gang**.The veteran director inquired about Sinatra's talks to high schools. Their admiration was mutual, forged in a common goal and now verging on a marriage of skills that would serve the cause of social justice in 1945.They agreed to continue their discussion of a movie on tolerance in the film colony[7].

LeRoy quickly renewed this exploration of the film subject at the dinner party he held just before the German surrender, adding the Communist scriptwriter Maltz, and the liberal producer Ross, as participants to expedite the production. During the brainstorming session that included their wives, the progressive coalition debated the most timely angle for a movie short that would exploit Sinatra's appeal to youth.The German question hovered over their discussion. Sinatra remembered how Hitler's early persecution of Jews had prompted the indictment of mob rule in **They Won't Forget**, a 1937 feature film directed by LeRoy. They agreed that surging American teenage prejudice called for another counter-attack on intolerance before the democratic lessons of the Nazi menace were forgotten. A movie promoting multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-racial unity would also accelerate the defeat of Japan. Both the lessons of the

past decade and the challenge of 1945 converged in their deliberation and their validation of Sinatra's wish to star in a film that would convert incipient young fascists into social democrats. A film reenactment of his brotherhood talks emerged from the planning meeting as the perfect answer to all the issues. Someone suggested using the popular ballad **House I Live In** that celebrated democratic pluralism, someone else the use of wartime film clips to dramatize the national teamwork that won battles abroad. They all agreed to donate their services and on the importance of haste[8].

Everything about the making of **House** evoked a spirit of emergency. The war in Europe was coming to a close and no one knew when the war in Asia would end. Even the production of the movie was crisis-ridden. Sinatra's professional schedule left little time in Hollywood and film stock was unavailable. Ross solved both problems by drafting a story line after the dinner party ended, handing it to Maltz the next morning for completion, and then wiring the chairman of the Fair Employment Practices Commission for permission to use scarce raw film stock in what would become a FEPC-sponsored production of a «national morale» effort. On May 7, the FEPC head wrote the chief of the Motion Picture Bureau of the Office of War Information for release of film to RKO, Ross' studio, which agreed to handle distribution of the film. Citing the importance of «brotherhood» to achieving a speedy victory over Japan as the compelling reason for the use of film, the minority right's spokesman also noted that the profits from the sale of the film would go to agencies fighting juvenile delinquency. The OWI quickly released the film. In less than a week, four days after V-E Day, **House I Live In** was produced[9].

Viewing the film now ultimately leaves the viewer disappointed. The dissatisfaction rests less in the general message of fighting prejudice than it does in the omissions of significant victims of it. It takes Sinatra from a studio recording session to a cigarette break in an alley where he encounters young boys beating up a peer because of his religion. The disappointment begins with the initial failure to name the religion, though that issue comes to mind when the liberal interventionist calls the gang «Nazi werewolves». Confounded, but then denying the association with the Germany enemy, the gang's spokesman boasts that his father was wounded in the war. The exchange prompts a homily by Sinatra on the teamwork that was winning the war, highlighted by a visual take to an apocryphal multi-ethnic, multi-religious plane crew that sunk a Japanese naval destroyer during the bleak war period in the Pacific. The narrator, Sinatra, finally says Jew. Afro-Americans, however, receive only a «throw away line» in the Whitmanesque song from which the title of the film is taken. Written in 1942 by a member of the wartime popular front, Earl Robinson, the popular ballad exuded glowing sentiments about the American «house» where the «butchers and the bakers» and «all races and religions» functioned harmoniously as a large and diverse family[10]. Race merits only an allusion in the film.

The failure of **House** to include black Americans in the team that was fighting the war suggest a lack of nerve among its makers. Although the title page of Maltz' pencil script notes the theme of «racial toleration,»[11] no black faces appear in the film and the combat crew dubbed into the film repeats the ritualistic tribute to the polyethnicity of wartime feature movies.The nation's critical racial dilemma, the crisis that summoned Sinatra to northern schools, receive only a word in the sentimental theme song. Filmmakers, even progressive ones, were masters at thematic indirection and novices at using film to confront its audience with deeply divisive issues.

This timidity was understandable in an expensive feature picture dependent on a national market for commercial success. In **House**, economic factors were only peripheral, however. The collaborators contributed their services while RKO, the distributor, and RCA, which owned the song copyright, waived their royalties. The $16,000 production cost, borne by RKO, was earmarked for repayment through film sale proceeds, while the real profits were stipulated for youth agencies[12].

How then does one explain the lack of bold content in a film that was meant to instruct youth in democratic courage? The answer is three-fold. Traumatized by «dark cloud of the Nazi epoch», the specter of German stormtroopers haunted the makers of **House** as much as hooded Americans. Purging American youth of the disease of Nazism would have to precede a direct attack homegrown racism. Perhaps merged with this fear of the lingering German danger was the unstated apprehension that a forthright film assault on racism might provoke an unmanageable social crisis. Finally, progressive doubtless hoped that young viewers would transfer the anti-prejudice message to racial discrimination.

Removed from the German cloud that hovered over Hollywood, Sinatra was free to address the growing danger to social democracy. Racial division required the renewed personal attention of the liberal missionary. While the chairman of the Fair Employment Practices Commission was orchestrating the distribution of **House** to juvenile delinquent agencies and to educational classrooms, Sinatra continued his personal missions to schools torn by racial conflict. In October he spoke to two high school assemblies in Harlem following the threat of a race riot there. Then he flew to Gary, Indiana, where white students had staged a strike in protest against attending classes with blacks recently integrated into the city's largest high school. At the request of city school officials, Sinatra spoke to an assembly of 4500 students and teachers from throughout the city, supplemented by another 1,000 on the street who heard his appeal for racial integration over sound amplifiers. One teacher from an all-black school who was present in the hall recalls that Sinatra's appeal for interracial brotherhood moved black students and their teachers «to tears». However, his direct attack on the strike leaders and their parents angered enough white students to postpone the end of the strike and the beginning of token integration in one school until the storm passed two weeks later[13].

The classroom use of **House** was equally disturbing to young Americans who remained unconverted to the democratic goals of the war. The number of movie projectors in public schools nearly tripled during the war years and the rate of production of 16 mm educational film had quadrupled. «Education for democracy»had become a central objective of many of these films, supplanting the main wartime goal of teaching young soldiers how to fight as a democratic team. **House I Live In** pioneered the transition. Yet, it was used gingerly at first. One expert in the usage of film in social studies classes noted that **House** was one movie that proved an exception to the normal rule of conducting discussion immediately after student viewing. Because he judged it contained such «a powerful message concerning respect for others regardless of race or religion,» he advised postponing classroom dialogue until students had a day «to think it over»[14]. Educators, as well as filmmakers, regarded racial and religious division as a social powderkeg and were reluctant to light the fuse.

Such caution in confronting youth with the democratic challenge that the nation faced in 1945 indicated that the issue was as dangerous as the Nazi war machine. It is no wonder then that Hollywood progressives were trepid about igniting the explosion. Only the FEPC wanted to conduct the full war against American racism. In a letter to Sinatra applauding him for his part in making **House** such «an effective and sensitive weapon against anti-Semitism», the commission chairman ascribed great importance to motion pictures «in the mass re-education away from racial and religious prejudice». He asked Sinatra to do «a similar movie concerning discrimination against Negroes and Mexicans particularly, and possibly Nessi-Japanese»[15]. Sinatra failed to answer this movie call to arms. Only the military services and the federal government that promoted its propagandist efforts in film included black Americans in the same crews with whites at the end of the war. The best example of this frontal film assault on racism was the documentary **Teamwork**. This 1945 Army film, that made a mockery of Nazi religious and racial hatred, also depicted blacks and whites hitting the Normandy beaches together[16].

House I Live In was meant to inspire the same democratic teamwork among young Americans at home. Although limited in its scope of attack on American prejudice, it pioneered a new message era in educational film and served as a prelude to feature movies that would include a fuller lineup of minorities to defend.

NOTES AND REFERENCES:

(1) In a telephone interview with Albert Maltz on June 23, 1984, he described the meeting and the composition of the group. Although the exact date of the dinner at LeRoy's home is still uncertain, the juxtaposition of RKO Production Records, the Fair Employment Practices Commission Papers and published accounts of the genesis of the movie short indicate the time to be late April or early May. See: RKO Production Information Files, RKO-P-150, Theatre Arts Library,

University of California at Los Angeles (hereafter cited as RKO, UCLA); Fair Employment Practices Commission Papers, Reel 42 in the University of Michigan Microfilm Publication of the FEPC Papers (hereafter cited as FEPC); Mervyn LeROY, **Mervyn LeRoy: Take One** (New York, 1968), pp.164-165, 170-171; Arnold SHAW, **Sinatra: Twentieth Century Romantic** (New York, 1968), pp. 83-86; New York **Daily Worker**, June 3, 1945.

(2) Orville GOLDNER, «Film in the Armed Services», in Godfrey M. ELLIOTT (ed.), **Film in Education** (New York, 1948), pp 403-404.

(3)Telephone interview with Maltz, June 23, 1984.

(4)Thomas R. FRAZIER (ed.), **Afro-American History: Primary Sources** (Belmont, Cal., 1988), pp.309-310; Alfred McCLUNG LEE, «Race Riots Aren't Necessary,» Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 107, July 1945 (Public Affairs Committee, Washington, D.C.): 1-31; Nicholas LEMANN, **The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America** (New York, 1991), pp. 3-77; Richard POLENBERG, **One Nation Divisible: Class, Race, and Ethnicity in the United States Since 1938** (New York, 1980), pp. 61-85; John Morton BLUM, **V Was For Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II** (New York, 1976), pp. 147-220; William GRAEBNER, «Outlawing Teenage Populism: The Campaign Against Secret Societies in the American High School, 1900-1960», **The Journal of American History** (September 1987): 426-430.

(5) George THORMAN, «Broken Homes», Public Affairs Pamphlet, No. 135, July 1947 (Public Affairs Committee, Washington, D.C.): 1-37; Alice WERTZ, «Youth and Your Community,» Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 108, November 1945 (Public Affairs Committee, Washington, D.C.): 1-32; LEE, «Race Riots Aren't Necessary», 26-30.

(6) SHAW, **Sinatra**, pp. 83-86; New York **Daily Worker**, December 10, 1945. Sinatra received several awards in late 1945 from organizations that fought intolerance. The Council for American Unity paid him special tribute at a Carnegie Hall meeting as did Ed Sullivan on his radio program: **The Radio Flash**, December 1, 1945.

(7) SHAW, **Sinatra**, p. 85; LeROY, **Take Two**, pp. 171-72; New York **Daily World**, June 3, 1945.

(8) **Ibid.**; Leon Goldberg to J.E. Francis, May 9, 1945, RKO Records, P-150, UCLA.

(9) LeROY, **Take Two**, pp. 170-172; interview with Maltz, June 23, 1984; Malcolm Ross to Taylor Mills, May 7, 1945, FEPC Papers, reel 42; RKO Production Files, RKO-P-150, UCLA.

(10) A print of **House I Live In** is located in the Motion Picture Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. It can be rented from Kit Carson Film Company in California; R. Serge DENISOFF, **Great Day Coming: Folk Music and the American Left** (Urbana, 1971), pp. 71-74.

(11) Albert Maltz Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming Library, Laramie, Box 1.

(12) RKO Production Files, RKO-P-150, UCLA.

(13) SHAW, **Sinatra**, p. 85; James B. LANE and Stephen G. McSHANE (eds.), **The Postwar Period in the Calumet Region: 1945-1950**, v. 14 of **Steel Shavings**, Indiana University Northwest, 1988, pp. 9-13; James B. LANE and Ronald D. COHEN, **Gary: A Pictorial History**, Danning Co. 1983, p.146; telephone interviews with Ruth Battle and Joseph Chapman, December 20, 1990. Battle was a teacher at the all-black Gary high school who was present in the audience. Chapman, a new executive director of the Gary Urban League, orchestrated a settlement after talks with white parents who objected to Froebel High School being singled out for integration.

(14) Godfrey M. ELLIOTT (ed.) **A Symposium on the Role of Film in the Field of Education** (New York, 1948), pp. 246-69 and p.152; **National Educational Association Research Bulletin**, Vol. XXIV, No. 3 (October 1946): 145-63; Dorothy Leeman McGRATH (ed.), **Motion Pictures for Postwar Education: American Council on Education Studies** (Washington, D.C., 1945): 1-15.

(15) Malcolm Ross to Sinatra, October 8, 1945, FEPC Papers, reel 42.

(16) **Teamwork** can both be viewed in the Motion Picture Division of the Library of Congress and in U.S. National Archives in Washington, D.C.