

# Theater and Film Critic Jay Carmody (1899–1973)

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Jay Carmody (April 16, 1899 – June 18, 1973) was a prominent theater and film critic for *The Washington (Evening) Star* over the course of 30 years, retiring in 1964. His career with the American capital's newspaper of record spans an important period in theater and film criticism; along with several others, Carmody helped introduce a new genre of American writing to a large audience. His critical perspective was nuanced, since he combined popular Hollywood and Broadway appeal with a commitment to cutting-edge European films; his stance as a Catholic was morally conservative, yet his writing style was basically encouraging and friendly. Carmody received several awards and served on international film juries.

## Biographical information

Francis Joseph Carmody (know as Jay) was born in the small town of Carrollton, Illinois. He got his first job at *The Star* in 1923, working at the copy desk, but left to work for a news syndicate and returned to the daily as a writer in 1936 (Haskins 115). *The Star* was one of Washington's two most important newspapers and continued to appear in print until 1981. It was the paper of record for Washington, DC and “staunchly conservative on the editorial pages.” Some of its writers supported slavery in the nineteenth century; others approved racial segregation in the 1950s. It was “a conservative powerhouse” compared to the more liberal *Washington Post* (Gilmore). In 1954, it had a daily circulation of 238,000 and 274,014 on Sundays; that put it at second place among the capital's papers (Williams 163-4). In its last decade, it had more than 300,000 subscribers (Castro).

Carmody wrote about both theater and film from the start; the first article I found featuring his by-line was a film review in 1938 (“Carole Lombard Sparkles”). In the 1940s, his articles often featured a photograph of the handsome author under the by-line, encouraging readers to identify with him personally. His daily column was (for some years) titled “The Passing Show.” Even when reviewing movies, he signed as “Jay Carmody, Drama Critic of The Star.” The paper advertised him as “one of the Nation's four leading drama critics” (Advertisement 1952).

In the mid 1940s, the drama critic also had a WTOP radio broadcast program called “Jay Carmody” (“Reporter”), but his radio engagements remained modest. Nor did he enter into television work in a pronounced manner, as did other newspaper critics like John Joseph O'Connor (1933–2009), a near-contemporary who started out covering theater and then wrote about TV for *The New York Times* for twenty-five years. Carmody did, however, make appearances on television talk shows with nationally-known personalities and at fundraising events. He appeared frequently on the Mark Evans Show.

Jay Carmody was named Critic of the Year by the Screen Directors Guild in 1954; the writer's Catholic network became clear in the ceremony's invocation prayer by the Catholic priest, Msgr. John K. Cartwright, and through a short speech by the Dominican priest and drama professor Gilbert Hartke (“Party”). Several years later, upon retiring, Carmody called the Screen Directors Guild award the “highlight of my career” (West). When he was honored by Broadway press agents at a National Press Club luncheon in New York in 1964, he donated the proceeds to a theater project at Catholic University in Washington (“Luncheon”).

Carmody lectured at the Stanford University Drama Department over the course of three weeks in July 1956. In a report about the lectures, *The Star* noted that while Stanford had known several artists in residence, the Palo Alto university had never had a “newspaper critic in residence.” One major lecture at Stanford – titled “The Damned Critics” – was open to the public and took place

in the university's major theater, which seated 1,700. "I shall attempt to prove that the critic is damned when he takes the course of trying to be a leader in a creative field, and equally damned when he seeks merely to be a reporter of what's happening in it," he said, adding that he was devoted to defending the critic's rightful place in the arts ("Drama Critic").

Another crowning moment was his role as president of the jury at the Berlin Film Festival in 1957; he was the only American juror. After Berlin he went on to report about theater at the Salzburg Festival, in London, and at Stratford-on-Avon's Shakespeare Festival ("Star's Jay Carmody"). The same year, the National Headliners Club named Jay Carmody "the nation's most consistently outstanding amusements columnist" (Clark). Carmody was named a delegate for the Cannes Film Festival in May, 1958 ("U.S. Enters"). He was the first American delegate to serve there (West). In 1967, he served in the advisory council tasked with selecting American films for international film festivals ("Notes").

Carmody retired in 1964 and died in 1973. He was buried in Gettysburg National Cemetery with a veteran's tombstone; he had served as a private in World War II for five months in 1942–1943.

## The Critic's New Audience

Hunka identifies the beginnings of serious American theater criticism in 1920, as a response to Eugene O'Neill's play *Beyond the Horizon* (39). Carmody's career at *The Star* corresponds to the highpoint that Hunka argues took place in the years before World War II. Rhetoric and news about personalities of the theater were often more important than systematic or in-depth coverage of the plays, and some critics – but not Carmody – even published collections of their reviews in book form.

His employers promoted Carmody as a reason to subscribe to the Washington daily. In an advertisement in the paper, Carmody's column was described as "The Only Seven-Day-a-Week, Around-the-Clock Coverage in Washington of Drama News." The text notes that their writer had twenty-seven years of newspaper experience, and that he "treats drama stories as news." The ad declared the newspaper's goal of having new plays reviewed in *The Star* first, citing Carmody as saying: "Plays and movies are the only commodities advertised in the newspaper that are purchased regularly sight-unseen. When you pay at the box office, you take your chances on what you'll see inside. Therefore, it is our duty to tell the people about this commodity." The promotion enjoins readers: for "the best in drama coverage, read *The Star*, evening and Sunday" (Advertisement Nov. 1951). The quarter-page advertisement ran repeatedly.

Reliable guidance in choosing a fitting play for a given evening was a welcome aid to newly affluent Americans who could afford to attend middle and high-brow shows, while their parents had not been able to. Newspaper readers all over the country "wanted guidance as to where to spend their hard-earned dollars, not insights into aesthetic concerns" (Hunka 46).

At times, Carmody also catered to a popular, even low-brow, audience while pretending to cultural aspirations. In April of 1940, he did a series called "Behind the Scenes in Hollywood," devoted not to gossip about film stars, but aiming to be a substantial analysis and thereby provide "a different picture" ("Jay Carmody takes a peek!"). In the event, Carmody went into gossip nonetheless, such as his somewhat breathless description of a lunchtime interview with a scantily-clad Lucille Ball ("Informally"). The story even features a caricature of Carmody (wearing a suit) as he meets Ball for lunch. Gossip was nothing new to his style; Carmody's column was usually devoted to a premiere or new movie, followed by a few paragraphs on gossip and current events in the Washington theater scene.

*The Star's* drama editor wrote for *The New York Times*, as well, but only rarely. A series of articles called "The Drama Outside Congress" ran in *The Times* in the summer of 1938. From time to time he would review New York plays for his Washington readers ("Its Players"), but several signals made it clear that he was a Washington writer; *The Times* would mention him

time and again, but not as an influential Washington critic, not a New Yorker. In the mid 1940s, there were several mentions of him in the *Times*' "News and Gossip of the Rialto" column. The *New York Times* had more clout than *The Star*, being truly national and thus international and employing more well-known theater critics (Hunka 42–3).

## Encouraged Higher Standards, International Film

*The Star's* drama editor had a pronounced interest in the international film scene, and encouraged higher quality in American entertainment, yet not in an elitist or aspersive manner. In an advertisement encouraging "factual films" – later called documentaries – as an educational medium, Carmody was cited as an authority ("March of Time").

During World War II, Carmody praised the film *Pastor Hall*, a 1940 British movie about the Protestant pastor Martin Niemöller based Ernst Toller's play. Carmody admired its portrayal "not merely of the militant churchman, but the kindly, intelligent, gentle German whose disappearance is one of the strangest phenomena in history" ("Pastor Hall").

He reported on international film news for decades, even when he knew his audience would probably never see the films he described. He covered Polish director Andrzej Wajda's 1958 film *Ashes and Diamonds* as English critics' choice for best foreign film of 1960 ("One Woman"). 1959 saw him recommending Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal*, although "obviously it is intended for considerably less than the mass of moviegoers" ("Sweden's Apex"). Two years later, he declared *La Dolce Vita* to be the best film of 1961, with *West Side Story* coming in second ("La Dolce Vita").

## University Theater

As the references to Stanford and Catholic University above suggest, Carmody took university theater seriously. He reviewed university productions, once covering the professional actress Sara Allgood as a guest star of Catholic University's student production of *The Far Off Hills* ("This Season's Best"). He also reviewed the *Brighton Rock* adaptation staged at Catholic University in 1942 ("Brighton Rock"). A 1960 article about developments at various Drama faculties showed his interest in faculty appointments ("Theater Men Agree").

## Catholic Conservative

Carmody was known for his fidelity to Catholic values, although he remained deeply conversant with mid-brow American culture. The repeated public appearances with Father Gilbert Hartke (most of all at the retirement party in 1964) reinforced perceptions of the critic's Catholic values, as did the decision to donate proceeds to a theater building which would be named after Hartke at Catholic University (Santo Pietro). After retirement he gave intermittent lectures for the anti-Communist Voice of America radio (West).

He was considered to be one of *The Star's* "gentle souls" (Broder). He did not relish his influence; instead, he considered it a responsibility, even a burden. "I was always terribly bothered by the power of the critic," he once said. "The night I wrote a review, I couldn't sleep because I always wondered if I did justice to everyone" (West).

Carmody criticized the musical version of Elmer Rice's play *Street Scene* in 1947, finding the plot to be full of bickering and ethnic conflict. The play's first version (1929) had won the Pulitzer Prize, and the post-war adaptation featured contributions from Kurt Weill (music), Langston Hughes (lyrics), and Elmer Rice (libretto). In distancing himself from it, the Washington critic showed that his tastes were certainly not avant-garde or experimental, even if he was devoted to intellectual substance and European trends (Looker). Other critics had praised *Street Scene* for its melting-pot dynamics and acceptance of American urban grit.

His rave review for DeMille's biblical film, *The Ten Commandments* ("the most opulent, extravagant motion picture of all time[...]") was cited in large newspaper advertisement in the *Star* (Advertisement 1956). But even when he disapproved of a film's moral content, as was the case for Louis Malle's *The Lovers*, Carmody did not disparage. Nonetheless, he declined to recommend the film, saying its sex scenes transgressed "absolutes of taste and morality" ("Case History"). While acknowledging the appeal of Alain Delon in *Purple Noon*, he distanced himself from its "sinful dazzle" ("Wickedness Dazzling").

## Conclusion

Popular American theater criticism has all but disappeared from the media landscape; very few papers aside from *The New York Times* publish stage coverage frequently. Film and television criticism is more widespread. Jay Carmody wrote thousands of reviews and news stories about theater and film in the 1930s through the 1960s. His life's work is valuable documentation of a burgeoning rhetorical style that one Washington newspaper considered to be among its most attractive assets.

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