

Interview: TCM Host Robert Osborne on Their First Classic Film Festival

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CHICAGO – Turner Classic Movies, the basic cable gift to film buffs everywhere, is launching their first TCM Classic Movie Festival in Hollywood, August 22nd-25th. TCM's main movie host and face of the network, Robert Osborne, will be there.

Osborne became the film guru we know today through a roundabout career route. Born in Washington state, he took his degree in journalism down to Hollywood during the late 1950s in hopes of becoming an actor. He hooked up with the famous Desilu studios, the brainchild of Desi Arnaz and Lucille Ball during the height of the “I Love Lucy” days.

It was Lucille Ball herself that encouraged Osborne to switch careers – Osborne himself said “especially when she saw me act” – and take his love for film to a writing career for various publications including the Hollywood Reporter. In April of 1994, he hosted the first year of Turner Classic Movies, where he remains to this day as preeminent presenter of the knowledge, preservation and true love of the movies.



Host with the Most: Robert Osborne of Turner Classic Movies
Photo Credit: Turner Classic Movies

HollywoodChicago.com got the privilege to sit down with Robert Osborne, to talk about his circuitous path to TCM and what to expect at the Classic Film Festival.

HollywoodChicago.com: You have a spectacular, eclectic line-up in store for the TCM Classic Film Festival. What programs within the event truly excites you?

Robert Osborne: I have to say there is not one of the films in the festival that I wouldn't want to go see on the big screen. There is nothing like that when you share it with an audience. I am particularly interested in seeing the restoration of 'Breathless' [1960], the 50th anniversary of that film, with lead actor Jean-Paul Belmondo present. Also 'Leave Her to Heaven' with Gene Tierney on the big screen in that vivid Technicolor, which won an Academy Award in 1945, will be extraordinary. Darryl Hickman, who was the child actor in the film, will be there to talk about that. So just a lot of things, including 'Laura' (1944) and 'Sunset Blvd.' [1950], there are many high points.

HC: Who is handling the projection duties with all these rare and incredible prints that the festival will be showing?

RO: They have a very good team there, and you bring up a good point. One of the reasons there are not more revival theaters is because prints are not available and are too expensive to print these days. And in the end, they can't really trust the projectionist to put it on the reel properly. At my festival in Athens, Georgia, we've always been successful in getting archival prints, because the studios trust the projectionists handling them. For the TCM Classic Festival, they've been very careful about having their projectionists be people the studio know and trust so we could get archival prints when necessary.

HC: 'A Star is Born' is being rumored for yet another go around. How important is Judy Garland's version and what will stun audiences about this newly struck remastered print?

RO: Not only will the print be in great shape, but also the power of Judy Garland on the big screen singing 'The Man Who Got Away.' Like all of our great entertainers at their peak, like Frank Sinatra or Lena Horne, when Garland is at her best, no matter what ratio or size that you see them, they are wonderful. But there is nothing like Judy Garland on a big screen when you are sharing it with an audience, and the power that comes in that. I think a lot of people have not had the experience or opportunity to see somebody like that on a big screen.

It's the same when you see Cary Grant enter a room in a movie on a giant screen. The impact of him, the way he looked, the way he moved so gracefully and all of that. It makes you say 'Wow.' If you ever wondered why he was such a star, after seeing him that way you understand. The impact that you get on a big screen can't be emphasized too much.



Jean Seberg and Jean-Paul Belmondo in 'Breathless,' Celebrating its 50th Anniversary at the TCM Classic Film Festival'

Photo Credit: Rialto Pictures

HC: Which of the celebrities that are introducing their classic films have you experienced to be most candid about their adventures in the business...as in don't miss this one?

RO: [Tony Curtis](#) [16] is always wonderful about that. He's very candid, outspoken and colorful, and he's at an age when he doesn't care what he says anymore, which is a lot of fun. He's a very nice guy.

HC: Who in your opinion is achieving a standard of classicism within filmmaking that stands up to the great classic directors/filmmakers of the studio era?

RO: Certainly Martin Scorsese is terrific today, but the problem today is that nobody is terribly consistent. However, in the great classic director's day there weren't always so consistent. We only remember the Howard Hawks, George Cukor and John Huston films that were great, but they made their share of stinkers, too, we've just forgotten about those. It's hard to be reverent today when directors make films

that are not as good. There will be time later, though, when their lesser films are forgotten and just focus on the greatness.

HC: Since you lived through the era, how did post-war America, the coming of television and the loosened production code most effect film history?

RO: It effected it in a good way by loosening up what was on the screen and in a bad by loosening up what's on the screen. There were so many pluses in having the production code eliminated because when you get any kind of censorship it always goes too far. It was getting so that even if a married couple was in a bedroom scene, it had to be twin beds, an even if there was a fire, they had to stop and put their robes on. [laughs] That just got ridiculous.

But then also it went in the opposite direction too far. Some of those films in the 1960s and '70s were so rancid, so bad, it's a wonder the industry survived it. One of the values of TCM today is that the whole family can sit and watch, even in a serious drama, and nobody has to worry about what they will do and say because the film industry because they were held to certain rules. That was a good thing, because today I'd be worried if I were a kid taking a girl to a movie for a first date, with some of things happening on screen, I'd be mortified.

HC: What was the origin of your relationship with Lucille Ball and Desilu? What is the greatest legacy of your relationship with Ms. Ball?

RO: My greatest legacy from Lucy, and not Desi so much, because in those days they were starting to go their separate ways, and you were either his friend or her friend. Lucy was the one that found me, and she's the one that was my friend. So the greatest thing about Lucy is that she became my mentor about the business. She knew I was interested in the business, not so much to be famous, but to work around it in some way. She was the one who made sure, for example, that when the Rat Pack came to Las Vegas that I would get to see that, or if Bette Davis was in a play or Vivien Leigh was appearing in Los Angeles not only would I see the show, but I'd get to go backstage. She was always emphasizing how important it was to make what is difficult look easy. In a sense, never let them see you sweat.



With Raymond Bailey [Mr. Drysdale] in 'The Beverly Hillbillies'
Photo credit: Filmways Television

HC: You have a personal historical footnote in show business history, being on the pilot of 'The Beverly Hillbillies.' How did you land that part and what did you think about the Hillbillies phenomenon that followed?

RO: [Laughs] Yes, that seemed like the dumbest job in the world to me at the time. We had no idea, because we're all used to that title now, but the Beverly Hillbillies sounded so stupid at that time, and I wanted to be a serious actor at that time. I had no idea that it would be a success, because everybody connected with the pilot were second-rate people at that point. Buddy Ebsen, Irene Ryan, they weren't big names at the time, and everyone else was a beginner. Nobody had any idea that it would be a success.

In those days when you did something like that you'd think 'well, I've done it but now it's going away' and you'll never have to worry about it again. [laughs] Now of course with reruns, YouTube and everything like that it comes back to haunt you forever after.

HC: As an expert on the Academy Awards, has modern press coverage dampened or enhanced the excitement of it?

RO: The thing that has dampened it, and this last Academy Awards was a great example, that there were so few major stars, except the nominees, that came on the red carpet. I was talking to Lauren Bacall afterwards and she said she'd never do the red carpet again, because of the lack of legitimate reporters there. The press is all insider, like E!, or reality-style shows that try to make you say something provocative, and then the next day say how terrible you look.

The worst incident I heard about was one awards show where young kids had credentials, and Robert DeNiro and they didn't know what to ask him. So one of the questions was, 'if you were going to be in the sequel to 'Twilight,' what part would you want to play?' The press today is full of people who are not qualified and not trying very hard to be good reporters.

HC: What is your proudest legacy from your career as the Turner Classic Movies main host?

RO: What I'm most proud of is the grip it has had on the focus and enthusiasm of people. Everywhere I go, people say it's all they watch and its the first channel they go to, their 'box of chocolates' that they check out first. That is so pleasing to me, because it means we really struck a chord. Helen Mirren told me on a red carpet that what we're doing it really a service to the whole world, to both preserve these films and to let us see them again. That's so important.

HC: I couldn't have put it better myself. This was a total honor to talk to you. You are one of my film heroes, I cannot get enough of your analysis and your passion for the history of cinema.

RO: Can I call you at 3am if ever get depressed and you can give me a pep talk? [laughs]

HC: You've got it sir, anytime.

Robert Osborne continues as the prime time host of Turner Classic Movies. Check locals listings for network location. He will also moderate the TCM Classic Film Festival in Hollywood, California, from April 22nd-25th. [Click here for the more information.](#) [17] Also in association with the festival, [click here for the HollywoodChicago.com interview with Eva Marie Saint.](#) [18]



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