

Interview: Director Jay Roach Channels His Inner ‘Trumbo’

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CHICAGO – Director Jay Roach loves his work, heading into another phase of his successful career. The man who directed the first two “Austin Powers” films is now taking on movie and American history with “Trumbo,” featuring Bryan Cranston (“Breaking Bad”) as the 1950s blacklisted screenwriter Dalton Trumbo.

The “black list” was a partnership between government and the film industry. Whenever a writer, director or actor would not “name names” to the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC) of the the 1950s, they effectively ended any chance of getting hired in Hollywood. HUAC was looking for Communists, as the threat from Soviet Russia at the time was seen as the greatest menace to American freedom. Never mind that Russia was a ally of the U.S. only ten years earlier during World War II, or that being a Communist was not illegal in America. It was a witch hunt, pure and simple, and Dalton Trumbo was one of the hunted.



Bryan Cranston and Jay Roach On the Set of ‘Trumbo’

Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

Not only was Trumbo blacklisted after refusing to name anyone for the committee, but he served time in prison for contempt of Congress. His story in the film “Trumbo” is one of courage and perseverance, against a tide of fear perpetrated by the studio system of the time, gossip columnist Hedda Hopper, and even movie stars like John Wayne. All are represented in the film, a Hollywood morality and history lesson. Director Jay Roach likes talking about this film because, “I’m sort of channeling Dalton Trumbo. He was a talkative guy, and I’m generally not that way. I’m feeling my inner Trumbo.”

Jay Roach said that and more in talking with HollywoodChicago.com. Lately, he also was the producer of the well-reviewed HBO show "The Brink," and took on politics and satire as a director in films like "The Campaign" and "Recount."

HollywoodChicago.com: In general, what do you think modern audiences understand least about the communist witch hunt of the 1950s?

Jay Roach: From our perspective now, there is a not a huge understanding about the totalitarian Communism that Soviet Russia practiced during the 1950s – it was an atrocious system. But when Dalton Trumbo and his friends joined the Communist Party it was 1943, and Russia was our ally in World War II. This was connected to a very popular movement of artists and intellectuals at that time towards anti fascism, and an alliance with the union movement.

There were two writer's unions in those days, the studio-friendly guild called the Screen Playwrights, and the more activist Writer's Guild. The studios were fairly upset that their group wasn't effective, and they sought to punish the other union by labeling them as Communists. It was a way to try and shut down what the unions were negotiating for, like better hours and pay. Trumbo and his friends joined the Communists mostly for these reasons.

HollywoodChicago.com: What type of Communist was Dalton Trumbo?

Roach: Trumbo himself was a terrible Communist. He was constantly criticizing the membership, and was opposite to being a loyalist. That's why we had Louis C.K. portray the harder line Communist, to accuse Trumbo of being a hypocrite. He actually was, because he liked his wealth, which was against the grain of being a Communist. I put title cards at the head of the film that explains the context.

HollywoodChicago.com: You portray John Wayne in the film as being on the side of the witch hunt, which was counter to his movie image. In your opinion, why did Wayne have such leanings?

Roach: He was just a very conservative guy, who had not served in World War II, and he was defensive about that – he almost overcompensated his anti-Communism because of that reason. But to his credit he was open about it, he even portrayed a member of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee in a film called 'Big Jim McClain.'

He was never shy about that fervor, but because he was never overly zealous about his politics, and of course his status as a movie, he was embraced by both the right and the left. This was in contrast to Hedda Hopper [portrayed in the film by Helen Mirren], whose attitude was 'once a Commie, always a Commie.'

HollywoodChicago.com: And what was behind the screenwriter's decision on which actors to depict as characters? Why wasn't Ronald Reagan used, for example, even though he seemed just as big an anti-Communist?

Roach: One of the series of decisions that the great screenwriter John McNamara made was about who to depict. Reagan had a role in HUAC, he was a friendly witness, but never went over-the-top about it. Hedda Hopper was a better direct opponent to Trumbo. We wanted to use Trumbo's battles to represent the larger battles, so the audience could understand the personal sacrifice he went through and the personal damage to his family. The choices were about who were the best representations of his antagonists, which is why we chose as we did.

HollywoodChicago.com: Bryan Cranston does a very specific characterization of Dalton Trumbo in the film. In your collaboration with him on it, what did you both notice about Trumbo himself that really made Cranston's interpretation shine?

Roach: The first thing we noticed was how flamboyant Trumbo was in real life. It's hard to imagine in this day and age the accent in his speaking voice, the Mid Atlantic mixture of an English and American dialect, so flowery and oratorical that it almost sounds theatrical. It would be uncool today, no one would ever speak that way.

So for Bryan to go back in time and become this larger-than-life and somewhat theatrical guy, who performed his ideas and rhetoric in public in a melodic and flashy way, was a bit of a risk. We were nervous that it would come across as big and weird, but it was authentic. Bryan created something completely unique, that was earned by its authenticity. That's what gave us the license to push it a bit.



Bryan Cranston in ‘Trumbo,’ Directed by Jay Roach
Photo credit: Bleecker Street Media

HollywoodChicago.com: You forged your career in comedy, and yet recently you’ve been moving into more history and satire, with ‘Recount,’ ‘Game Change,’ ‘The Campaign’ and ‘The Brink.’ What is behind this evolution and personal interest in this direction?

Roach: I was always interested in the larger picture, I was pre-law in college, and had a degree in economics. I was very interested in the big question ‘how then shall we live?,’ how do we organize as a civilization when we are so different, and often don’t get along, yet we know at some point we have to unite for the common good? I actually really care about those issues, and I’m driven to understand how it works.

HollywoodChicago.com: Is that why you were drawn to the life of Dalton Trumbo?

Roach: Yes, because he was obsessed with justice. He always said he fought so many fights, all seemingly different, but all about the concepts of fairness and justice. When something so unjust as the black list happened, he would come to life in a certain way. Trumbo wrote this incredible pamphlet, almost on the level of Tom Paine’s ‘Common Sense,’ called ‘The Time of the Toad.’ It’s an exquisitely written treatise regarding the black list era.

In his life, Trumbo uses wit and comedy to fight these very high-stakes battles. I hope I can now use my ability to communicate, without being too precious or serious. It’s good to have some levity, even as you’re facing some really dark times, to mix it up a bit.

HollywoodChicago.com: ‘The Brink’ was a dark and absurdist satire on the level of ‘Dr. Strangelove,’ but at its heart was motivated by the weakness and narcissism of human beings. How close to reality do you think the heart of darkness was in ‘The Brink’?

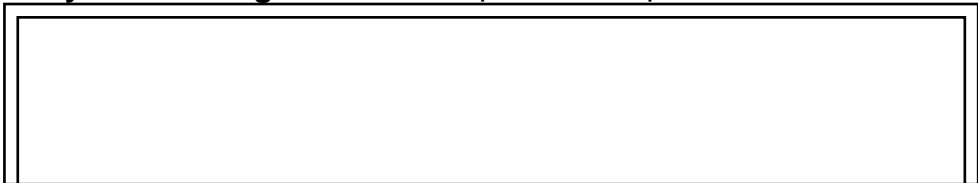
Roach: It was about the compelling need to make countries get along to prevent war, in contrast with the totally petty and selfish bullshit that drives the individuals who are supposedly in charge of these countries. It’s hard to believe that these self-centered people have nuclear weapons that they can fire at any moment. Even modern wars are fought like revenge tales from some petty grievance. It was definitely tapping into the Dr. Strangelove vibe, which is one of my three top favorite films or all time.

HollywoodChicago.com: The Austin Powers films were not only huge, but culturally influential. When you were faced with that first sequel, what was most daunting, and how do you think the production overcame that obstacle?

Roach: To this day, people ask me where is Austin Powers 4? I don’t have that answer, it so hard to come up with a story that deserves an encore like that. When we did the first sequel, it was on coattails of the first one doing so well when it was released on video, so we really didn’t know what to do with the second plot.

When we had ideas that earned there way in, it began to get okay. The hook for me was ‘Mini-Me.’ We only auditioned one guy – Verne Troyer – and at the time I said, ‘we have to get this guy, get him life insurance, whatever he needs’ because there was no other way or actor to do it. [laughs] It was amazing to me just to talk to him...he was Mini-Me.

HollywoodChicago.com: And a perfect companion for Dr. Evil...





Director Jay Roach of 'Trumbo'
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Roach: I love Dr. Evil as a walking, talking, narcissistic manifestation of everything screwed up about human existence – his desire to take over the world, and have the world reflect his own power lust. Mini-Me was the pint sized clone that was the perpetuation of Dr. Evil's own legacy. That concept earned the sequel.

HollywoodChicago.com: You recently finished a HBO project on Lyndon Baines Johnson ['All the Way'], with Bryan Cranston portraying LBJ. What do you think is most elusive about this divisive figure, and how did you and Bryan try to create an understanding regarding that elusiveness?

Roach: Johnson is a big and larger-than-life guy, we just tried to give him the dynamic range that he actually had. His technique in negotiation would be that he'd lean into you and take away your personal space, it didn't matter your party affiliation when he was trying to convince you of something.

This is a movie version of the play, and when Bryan was on stage the bigness of the man was played to the back of the house. When we turned the cameras on that, it changed a bit with close-ups, but we got just as much power in that beautiful intimacy.

HollywoodChicago.com: In the upcoming election of 2016, what trends do you observe that could possibly drive our society back to a witch hunt, questioning American loyalties that were depicted in 'Trumbo,' and what do you believe could take us into that direction?

Roach: There is one thing out there that really pissed me off. I am partisan to some extent on the Democratic side, but I consider myself more of an independent. I do understand the free market, having my economics degree, and if someone on the right had some good ideas, I'm not so dogmatic that I wouldn't listen to them.

All that said, when Ben Carson said that he would remove all federal funding for universities that had 'extreme political bias.' Who would decide what political bias was, and what is 'extreme'? That kind of policing of ideas has a striking resemblance to the black list, and that's what happened during that era.

"Trumbo" continues its release in Chicago on November 13th. See local listings for theaters and showtimes. Featuring Bryan Cranston, Louis C.K., Diane Lane, Michael Stuhlbarg, Helen Mirren and John Goodman. Screenplay adapted by John McNamara, based on a biography by Bruce Cook. Directed by Jay Roach. Rated "R"



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