

## Adrian Scott

Member, SWG; producer,  
*Murder, My Sweet, Cor-  
nered, Crossfire, So Well  
Remembered*

### YOU CAN'T DO THAT

I'd like to talk about *Crossfire* for a few minutes. As many of you know, it is the first picture that has been made which deals frankly and openly with the subject of anti-Semitism. I would like to tell you a little of its history first, focusing on the behind-the-scenes problems and the pressures to which we—who made it—were subject.

The project was conceived some two years ago. A book, *The Brick Foxhole*, had been written by Richard Brooks, then in the uniform of the Marine Corps. *The Brick Foxhole* was melodrama. It was soldiers in wartime. It was an attack on native Fascism—or the prejudices which exist in the American people which when organized lead very simply to native Fascism. It was an angry book, written with passion rooted in war—"in a dislocated, neurotic moment in history." While it did not deal exclusively with anti-Semitism, it nevertheless gave an opportunity to focus simply on anti-Semitism. It was a subject we wanted to do something about, it was a subject that needed public airing. And it was melodrama.

We had made several melodramas and were generally dissatisfied with the emptiness of the format, which in many ways is the most highly-developed screen format. The screen had done melodramas well, but mainly they were concerned with violence in pursuit of a jade necklace, a bejeweled falcon. The core of melodrama usually concerned itself with an innocuous object, without concern for reality, although dressed in highly realistic trappings. Substituting a search for an anti-Semite instead of a jade necklace, at the same time investigating anti-Semitism, seemed to us to add dimension and meaning to melodrama, while lending an outlet for conviction.

This was all fine, theoretically. It was fine to talk about it, and it would be interesting to do; but, as you know, the working producer doesn't have the right or the power to make what he wants. Neither does a writer. Nor a director. The problem was the okay from the

Front Office—that civilized monster which has no other concern but to think up devious ways to make you unhappy, or so you think. As producer, it was my job to go to the front office, which I did. At the time, William Dozier was the executive in charge.

I outlined the scheme to him: to make this picture at a minimum cost; in a short period of time, 23 days; to use people that we had confidence in, who had never been given a chance; in brief, to make this highly controversial subject-matter an exciting picture and an honest gamble. Dozier commented that he was worried about anti-Semitism; and, though he had no sure way of knowing, he'd felt from his personal experiences that it had grown since Hitler's demise, rather than diminished. Dozier ordered an option taken on the material.

So far, so good. We did some more thinking about it. Virginia Wright of the *Los Angeles Daily News* announced the project in a column. People called me. They said it would be fine if we could do it, but there was a long way to go to get it in production. People called Edward Dmytryk, the director, and John Paxton, the writer, with the same sort of mournful note in their voices. Some said it was wrong to do it in a melodramatic format. Some said: Why do it? We were young. This picture could come later. We were sticking our necks out. It could be catastrophic. Not only did people say this to us—we said it to ourselves.

We left for England to make *So Well Remembered* and, on the estate of Sir Oswald Mosley—now turned into a boarding-house,—we thought about *The Brick Foxhole* some more. We worried more about it than we *thought* about it. We wondered if they would really let us make it. I got a sinus attack for which a Harley Street specialist could not find a reason. Clearly, he was a quack. Paxton had some stomach trouble which he attributed to the English food, although none of the rest of us had trouble at that time. Paxton and I continued to kick the project around—with Dmytryk when he was free from his chores,—and we managed (in these conferences which were to create *Crossfire*) to find a number of reasons why *Crossfire* couldn't be made.

1) It had never been done before. 2) They wouldn't let us do it. 3) Everybody says that pictures of this kind lose their shirts at the box-office. Besides, motion pictures decline social responsibility. They have one responsibility only: to stockholders, to make them rich or richer. Sure-fire stuff is rule-of-thumb; legs, torsos, bosoms, shapely and magnificent, with or without talent, are the vestiture and invest-



ment of films, beyond which only the fool goes. Why be a fool? 4) This was the wrong way to do this subject. 5) Actors would not risk their reputations. 6) A number of exhibitors would refuse to play the picture. 7) This picture would hurt somebody's feelings. Probably some nice anti-Semite's. 8) This was not an effective way to combat anti-Semitism. It was much better not to talk about it.

And, having exhausted that, we continued discussions on the most effective way of making it.

We returned home in November of last year. The studio had gone through a change of administration. Peter Rathvon was in temporary charge of production, negotiating, as we later found out, with a new production head.

I was home from England a few days, when I was told by the Story Department that there was a possibility that the option on *The Brick Foxhole* might be dropped.

About this time, I had a series of X-rays on my stomach. Clearly, I'd fallen victim to the old producer complaint—ulcers. I drank horrid white liquid and a man with lead gloves poked me in the stomach and the damn fool couldn't find anything wrong.

I felt I was the victim of a plot and I said to nobody at all that they couldn't do this to me.

I was ready to have it out with Peter Rathvon. Incidentally, Rathvon is quite a man to have things out with—he is not only president of the production company, he is President of RKO Theatres and also Chairman of the Board of Directors of RKO. He speaks with some authority.

I told him about the project, and he said it was very interesting and this was the first he'd heard of it. We all had been abroad. We had no opportunity to discuss it with him. Familiarizing himself with the lot, he'd run across *The Brick Foxhole*. He assumed that I would on my own drop the option, since it was about a moment in history which could be better analyzed several years hence. He had no objections to a picture on anti-Semitism. As a matter of fact, he thought it was a good idea. The sterility of general motion picture production was something which bothered him—here was a good, useful way of introducing a new subject-matter. He ordered the option to be renewed.

At about this time, my ulcerous condition mysteriously abated.

We started actual work on the screenplay when Dore Schary was made head of production. Schary's record is known to all of you.

It is a record generously-laden with progressive picture-making. But—now something else had to be considered. Schary was new. He had an extremely difficult job of reorganization facing him. Sure, he wanted to make pictures with a mature content. He was on record as saying this. But anti-Semitism was a different matter. This was an explosive subject. It would be highly embarrassing to present him with a decision of this nature a few weeks after arriving on the lot. Was it right to do it now? Maybe a few months from now? These were our nightmares.

The night after I sent John Paxton's magnificent script to him, two sleeping-pills didn't work. I arrived haggard the next morning—a little late. I learned that Mr. Schary had made an appointment with my secretary—I was due in his office in ten minutes. So I went up.

He said, "I think this will make a good picture. Let's go." Overnight, the lot was transformed into a unit for *Crossfire*. Every department swung into operation to meet the challenge of making an "A" picture on a "B" budget. Robert Young left Columbia at 12 o'clock, having finished one picture, and at 1 o'clock started *Crossfire*. Robert Mitchum cut short a vacation. Robert Ryan would have murdered anyone who prevented him from playing the part of the anti-Semite.

Conferences were held with Schary, who made suggestions which improved the script. This, of course, is revolution, when it is necessary to admit into the record that the contributions of a studio head were not only used but welcomed. The picture went into production on a 23-day schedule. The photography by Roy Hunt was painstakingly faithful to the script values. Dmytryk brought it in on schedule and, most important, achieved his finest direction to date.

That is the story and these were the pressures we were subject to.

I have gone into the history of *Crossfire* at this length, not for the purpose of examining *Crossfire* but to examine my colleagues and myself. For two years, we feared not that we would not make a good picture, but that we would not make a picture at all. Through all the long months before we started work, fear consumed us. Why does this fear occur? Where does this fear come from? It does not require complex medical opinion to discover the source.

It is a fear produced with a Hollywood trademark. Throughout its comparatively short history, Hollywood has been the victim of an infinite variety of lobbyists who claim the right to dictate what pictures shall be made and what the content of those pictures will be. As a result of these pressures, a complex and subtle system of thought has

grown up around the industry. At times it is not so complex and not so subtle. And the newcomer, before he can successfully make his way, must not only become accustomed to this pattern, but must become a part of it. The producer's first consideration of any property is: "Can I get this by the production Code?" Notice the wording: "Can I get it by?" It is not a deliberate thought process, it is a reflex action—that automatic. Similarly function the writer and the director and the executive. And pity the poor cameraman who because of the famous cleavage controversy must now subvert the bosoms of American womanhood from two into one!

Incidentally, it is not my purpose here to estimate whether the individual or the industry is chiefly responsible for this fear among us. I am principally interested in the fact that it exists, in the fact that it does touch the individual, and transforms his work into something he does not want it to be.

My colleagues and I are guilty. We imposed a censorship on ourselves, in first considering a picture on anti-Semitism and during its preparation. There is nothing in the code of the Producers' Association which prevents the making of this picture. The Producers' Association, Mr. Breen in particular, applauded this picture. He felt it was a fine contribution, and went so far as to defend us against snide and ridiculous rumors. This fear—this self-imposed censorship resulting from fear—is not an isolated phenomenon confined to my colleagues and myself. It is a virus infecting all of us. It can cause creative senility, hackery and lousy pictures. It constitutes conservatism to the point of reaction. This creative reaction results in cliché thinking and cliché work and cliché pictures.

We are not, however, the cliché that we produce on the screen. We are not that hero—the strong American, rough, tender, witty, intelligent, unconquerable except by the little school-teacher from Boston. We are not the Clark Gable we write, direct and produce, who with his bare hands tears rich dynasties apart, with only Hedy Lamarr by his side. We are—rather—the wish-fulfillment of this creation. We are, in fact, clichés compounding further clichés.

The fear is a state of mind, and like a state of mind it is subject to change. It is not easy to change; it is sometimes not profitable; on the other hand, it is sometimes immensely profitable. The enormous success of pictures honestly dealing with their subjects is proof enough. But, I repeat, it is subject to change. It has changed in the past. Behind us, we have a record of picture-making which has dignity and courage.

I would like briefly to cite a few cases—pictures which were made in spite of the taboos:

*The Story of Louis Pasteur*, the great French scientist, was a realistic appraisal of the scientist. At the time it was held that you could not make a picture about a bug, about diseased cows, about hydrophobia and mad dogs and children suffering the ravages of the disease. Aspects of Pasteur was seized upon and made highly unattractive. The result we know—a biography of dignity, entertainingly telling the story of a man who in his day fought medical reaction.

*Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. I do not know whether Darryl Zanuck, who produced this, was subject to pressure. It is quite conceivable that he was. But the mere fact of making this picture made Mr. Zanuck take a stand—against the abuse of people. That it was attacked when it was released, is an established fact. That it was a fine picture, needs no elaboration.

There are others made in opposition to pressure: *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, *Mission to Moscow* and the pictures which depicted the gangster era. The part the gangster pictures played in causing legislation against prohibition is well-known.

More recently *Boomerang* and *The Farmer's Daughter* have been attacked, and *The Best Years of Our Lives*—and to their everlasting credit, Samuel Goldwyn and Dore Schary have answered their attackers. During the preparation of *The Best Years*, it is conceivable that Mr. Goldwyn was told that he shouldn't make a picture about returning veterans—the people were tired of war, of soldiers in uniform, they wanted to forget, they wanted to think about something else, to be happy, joyful. If Mr. Goldwyn had listened, he would not only have done himself and the public a rare disservice, he also would not have had the biggest grosser of the year.

These pictures, all of them, did not ask for revolution. They merely asked for an extension of democracy. They treated humanity with compassion—and this today is becoming a crime. This crime is something which the American people want. Their support of *The Farmer's Daughter* and *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Kingsblood Royal* and *Gentleman's Agreement*, I submit as evidence. I have it on my own personal record from two preview audiences of *Crossfire*.

We received the largest number of cards ever accorded an RKO picture in its two previews. Over 500 were received from the preview held at the RKO 86th Street Theatre in New York—on the fringe of Yorkville, the old Fritz Kuhn district. Over 500 were received

at the RKO Hillstreet in Los Angeles. 95% of the cards heartily approved of *Crossfire*. An overwhelming majority liked those scenes best which directly came to grips with anti-Semitism. A great majority asked the screen to treat more subjects like this.

That tired, dreary ghost who has been haunting our halls, clanking his chains and moaning, "The people want only entertainment," can be laid to rest, once and for all. The American people have always wanted and more than ever want pictures which touch their lives, illuminate them, bring understanding. If we retreat now, because of our own doubts, not only do we do a great disservice to the American audience, but we do a most profound disservice to ourselves.

For, this Fear we've become accustomed to, this adjustment we have made to taboos, are the allies of the Thomas Committee, the Tenney Committee, and their stooges within and without the industry. Our Fear makes us beautiful targets—we are in the proper state of mind for the operation of these committees which in pretending to defend actually subvert our democratic way. We are magnificently adjusted to bans, and ripe for more bans, which inevitably will result if we allow it. There are supercilious cynics among us who conceivably could derive a singular pleasure from further bans on what we write, direct or produce. Further bans extend an already-flourishing martyr complex—more reason to sit by, substituting luxury and creative locomotor ataxia for honest creative effort.

I believe we have a job to do: to combat the controls which can lead only to more sterility in the motion picture and to more reaction generally. If we allow ourselves to be consumed by our fears, this can happen. While this marriage of reaction is going on, we've got to speak now—or we'll be forced to "forever hold our peace".

Adrian Scott, "You Can't Do That," Conference on Thought Control in the USA, 1947.  
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