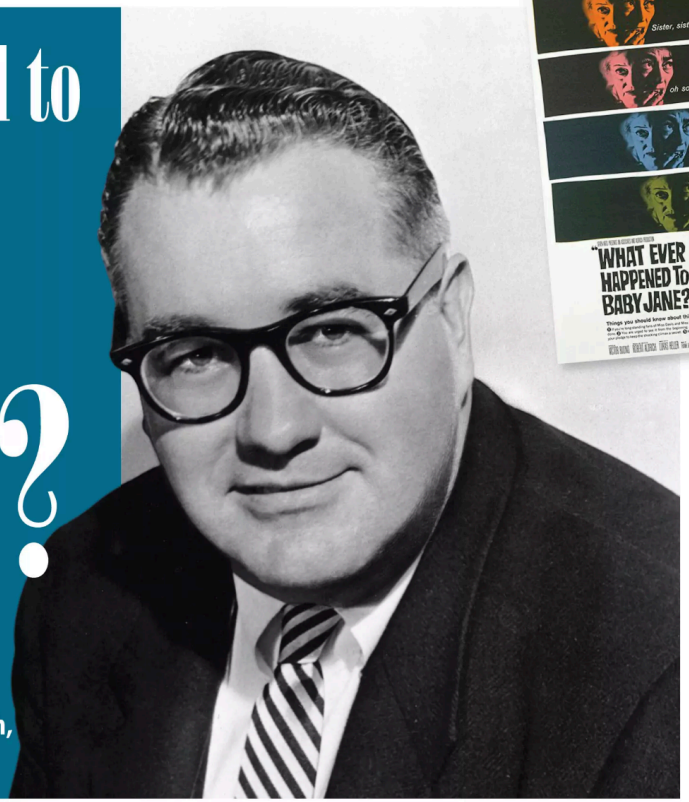
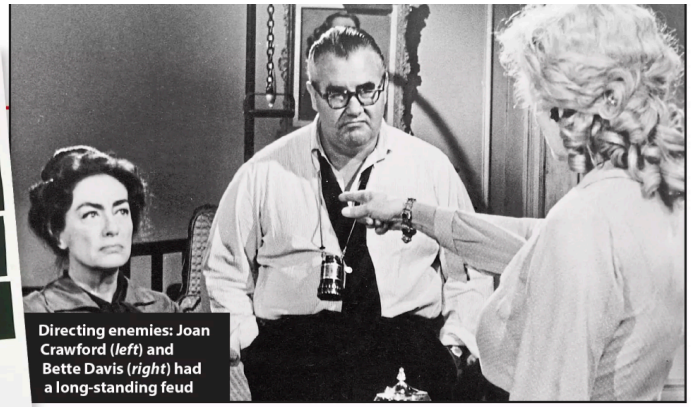
Whatever happened to Robert Aldrich?

He directed some of the biggest films of the Sixties, including Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? and The Dirty Dozen, and was one of Hollywood's most outspoken liberal voices. Forty years on from his death, Steve O'Brien remembers the great Robert Aldrich





Directing enemies: Joan Crawford (*left*) and Bette Davis (*right*) had a long-standing feud

DID YOU KNOW?

Aldrich was a two-term president of the Directors Guild of America.

Few film directors' careers bridge the beginnings of the Hays Code to the anything-goes era of the 'movie brats'. When Robert Aldrich worked on his first motion picture (as assistant director on 1948's Arch of Triumph), Harry S. Truman was US President, and America's best-selling song was the ragtime sounds of Twelfth Street Rag by Pee Wee Hunt. By the time of his final film, ...All the Marbles in 1981, it was Ronald Reagan and, rather fittingly, Bette Davis Eyes by Kim Carnes.

That Robert Aldrich managed to weather 33 years worth of social, political and cultural change is a testament to his durability and versatility and to his devout belief in movies as an expression of protest. There aren't many filmmakers of the Golden Age that are still invoked by today's hottest directors, but Aldrich is a name that frequently surfaces in interviews as a source of inspiration. Quentin Tarantino said a few years ago that Aldrich's Ulzana's Raid (1972) "is one of the greatest westerns of the Seventies". Meanwhile Martin Scorsese says he treasures a letter Aldrich wrote praising Raging Bull (1980). Robert Aldrich's films, it seems, have a fire in them that time has failed to extinguish.

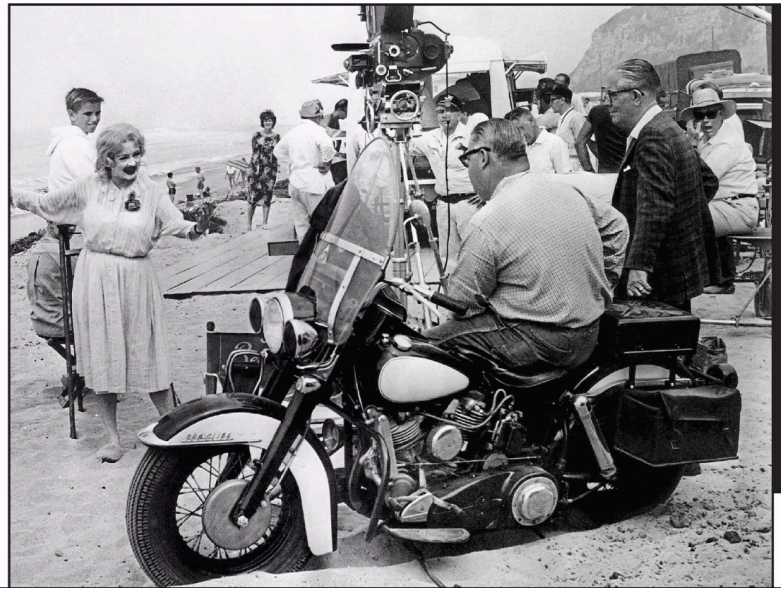
PROGRESSIVE VOICE

That he became one of Hollywood's most impassioned liberal voices was something of an aberration for the Aldrich line. He was born into extreme wealth and privilege – his grandfather was a Republican US Senator and among his various uncles were a member of the House of Representatives, and a chairman of the Chase Manhattan Bank. His aunt, meanwhile, had married John D. Rockefeller Jr., making Nelson Rockefeller, the four-term governor of New York State and US Vice-President under Gerald Ford, Aldrich's first cousin. His left-wing leanings estranged Aldrich from many in his family.

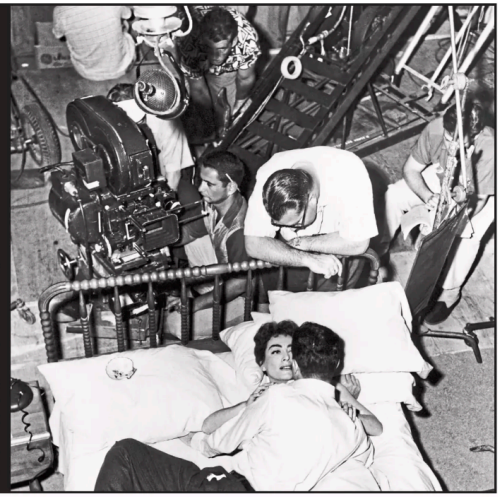
"I think anybody with any brains in 1936-40 would have been a communist," Aldrich said in 1976. "They were the brightest, they were the quickest, they were the best, and you found working with people of that persuasion more stimulating, more exciting."

Yet despite his progressive beliefs, he escaped censure from the Joseph McCarthy-headed House Un-American Activities Committee. Maybe it was because of his bloodline, maybe it was because he'd entered the film world after the Thirties, by which time recruitment by communist organisations was waning. The result was, after Hollywood's most politically active writers and directors had been blacklisted, and those filmmakers that had named names retreated to safer, less aggravating fare, Aldrich was one of the few remaining directors free to make subversive cinema that challenged the status quo and held America's leaders to account.

Kiss Me Deadly (1955), a movie that Martin Scorsese has talked up as one of the greatest ever made, was a film noir that reads as ➤



Bette Davis (*left*) was nominated for an Oscar for What Ever Happened To Baby Jane? and the film won the award for Best Costume Design



Right: Cliff Robertson with Joan Crawford in Autumn Leaves. She said "Everything clicked... The cast was perfect, the script was good and I think Bob (Aldrich) handled everything well."

a metaphor for the paranoia and fear of nuclear annihilation that prevailed during the Cold War. In his three movies set during the Second World War – Attack! (1956), The Dirty Dozen (1967) and Too Late the Hero (1970) – Aldrich paints American officers as corrupt, cowardly and often brutal. For him, the 'Greatest Generation' was a propaganda-driven myth. His 1972 movie Ulzana's Raid, meanwhile, acts as a counter-narrative to John Ford's white-centred westerns, as the US Army battles against Apache guerrillas in 1880s Arizona. It wasn't hard, at the time, to see the film as an allegory for the then-current conflict in Vietnam.

"Many movies have been made about the conflict between the Apache and the American Cavalry," Tarantino said. "But only Aldrich's film dealt with the Apache Wars as a genuine military conflict... a war film about a giant nationalistic military machine battling a guerrilla army it can't comprehend."

AN AUTEUR IN THE SYSTEM

Aldrich is one of the few American directors feted by the French New Wave, whose number included such avant-garde agitators as Jean-Luc Godard, Claude Chabrol and François Truffaut. In Aldrich they saw a provocative, cine-literate auteur working within the studio system. "To appreciate Kiss Me Deadly," Truffaut wrote in Cahiers du Cinéma, "you have to love movies passionately, and to have a vivid memory of those evenings when you saw Scarface, Under Capricorn, The Blood of a Poet and The Lady from Shanghai. We have loved films that had only one idea, or 20, or even 50. In Aldrich's films, it is not unusual to encounter a new idea with each shot."

To many who worked with Robert Aldrich, their recollection is of a kind and considerate man. He remained loyal to many of his colleagues, keeping the same editor (Michael Luciano), cinematographer (Joseph Biroc) and composer (Frank De Vol) for most of his movies. And his loyalty stretched even further. After he founded Aldrich Studios in the early Seventies, he kept his employees on the payroll even when there was no work.

"This really hurt the business," his daughter Adell told the Directors Guild of America. "He simply couldn't stand watching the staff go without a paycheck. He was the same way with his blacklisted friends. When I went through his files after he died, I found out how much money he loaned to friends who couldn't work and what he spent to buy their scripts, just to give them money to survive in exile."

Not that you'd get that sense of the man had you watched Feud: Bette and Joan. The Ryan Murphy-penned 2017 series about the making of Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? (1962) depicted the director as a sly and deceitful hack, with little evidence of the fierce morality that fuelled him in real life.

"One way to understand Aldrich," says the director's biographer Alain Silver, "is to know that the version of him in Feud is pretty much the exact opposite of who he was. In the [series], he's shown as a crass and venal man, which he wasn't at all."

Directing Dean Martin on the set of 1963's comedy western 4 For Texas

Celebrating Beryl Reid's birthday: Aldrich directed Reid in 1968's The Killing of Sister George

In the FX mini-series Feud: Bette and Joan, Aldrich is portrayed by English actor Alfred Molina.

The Dirty Dozen caused controversy at the time but became the biggest film of Aldrich's career, inspiring filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino and Martin Scorsese

Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? is considered one of Aldrich's very best pictures, and it's certainly the film that rescued the director's commercial and critical reputation after a string of flops. It was a massive hit at the box office and earned five Academy Award nominations, while reviving the popularity of its leads, Bette Davis and Joan Crawford. It also kickstarted a strand of horror movies starring older actresses, nicknamed 'psycho-biddy', a genre Aldrich returned to with 1964's Bette Davis-headlining Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte, another hit and Academy Award favourite.

The Sixties were good to Aldrich. Maybe it was because Hollywood and society had caught up with him at last. Emboldened by the success of Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? and Hush... Hush, Sweet Charlotte, his company, The Associates & Aldrich, announced a swathe of features, most with a progressive bent, including the groundbreaking lesbian drama The Killing of Sister George (1968).

It was 1967's The Dirty Dozen, however, that would give Aldrich his most sizable hit. This star-drenched war picture was nominated for four Academy Awards (winning Best Sound Effects) and spawned three (Aldrich-less) sequels. Even though it looked like a standard genre movie, it was vigorously subversive, depicting the brutality of war, not just from the German side, but by American soldiers. "What I was trying to do was say that under the circumstances, it's not only the Germans who do unkind and hideous, horrible things in the name of war but that the Americans do it and anybody does it," the director explained. "The whole nature of war is dehumanising."

DID YOU KNOW?

The Seventies brought fewer commercial successes, even if critically his movies were still being lauded. Depression-era Emperor of the North Pole (1973) remains a tough and propulsive actioner and the next year's The Longest Yard was an impassioned response to the suppression of the Attica prison riot of 1971 by his cousin, New York governor Nelson Rockefeller.

LASTING INFLUENCE

Aldrich made his final movie, ...All the Marbles, a female wrestling comedy starring Peter Falk, in 1981. At the time, he said: "I'm 63 and I've had hits every 10 years and I just hope I can function long enough to have one in the Nineties." Sadly, that wasn't to be. Robert Aldrich succumbed to kidney failure in Los Angeles on December 5, 1983. His influence lives on, however, with his films feeding into many of today's most celebrated movies. There's more than a hint of The Dirty Dozen in Quentin Tarantino's The Hateful Eight (2015) and Inglourious Basterds (2009), while Martin Scorsese has talked of Aldrich being an inspiration for many of his movies, particularly 2006's Oscar-hoovering The Departed.

Despite the loving homages, 40 years after his death, cinema still misses Robert Aldrich, a man whose morality, passions and values were there to see in every one of his films. He made his points in thrilling, populist movies that spoke to the everyman. In 2023, there's nobody quite like Robert Aldrich.