

“*First is First and Second is Nobody*”

The Philip Yordan Story

by Alan K. Rode
Sentinel Senior Editor

Who was Philip Yordan? Was he the renowned Oscar-winning screenwriter with upwards of 100 feature films—credited and uncredited—on his résumé, including such estimable films noir as *Dillinger* (1945) *The Chase* (1946), *House of Strangers* (1949), *Detective Story* (1951), *The Big Combo* (1955), and *The Harder They Fall* (1957)? Or was Yordan’s screenwriting career the most elaborate and prolonged “front” in Hollywood history? Was he the template for the character of Sammy Glick in Budd Schulberg’s scathing novel *What Makes Sammy Run?* A cigar-chomping hustler who pitched corkscrew deals from more angles than Luis Tiant? Did he exploit blacklisted writers by taking their credit and paying them a pittance? If so, why did blacklisted screenwriter Bernard Gordon, among others, speak so highly of him? Why did top-notch directors like Anthony Mann and Nicholas Ray repeatedly choose to work with Yordan? How could a con man rise to glory orchestrating star-studded spectacles such as *El Cid* (1961), *King of Kings* (1961) and *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964)? How did a guy like Phil Yordan get his mitts on that much talent and that much cash?

Yordan’s furtive 50-year history in Hollywood is reminiscent of the Hall of Mirrors denouement in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1946). One has to decipher Yordan’s myriad reflections to pin down the real man. Nearly every story about him is followed by an alternate version. To add to the perplexity, Yordan (who died in 2003) left behind a draft of his intended autobiography. A jumble of typed and handwritten pages, the manuscript is another blurred reflection—less a memoir than a map of buried treasure. Only no X marks the spot.

Born in 1914, Yordan grew up on the West Side of Chicago. As a teenager, he ran a mail order beauty supply business out of the family basement, buying wholesale stock, repackaging and selling goods to outlets at a profit. Bullied by peers for his owlish demeanor and Coke bottle glasses, Yordan was a voracious reader of detective stories; he contemplated a career as a writer. After graduation from high school, he earned a law degree at night school, bought a car, and hired a kid to chauffeur him around the Windy City.

Rumor has it that Yordan had also hired someone to attend law school under his name, so he could get a degree without actually doing the work. No one who later dealt with Yordan in Hollywood dismissed this story out of hand. It would have been a prototypical Yordan move.

Law bored him. After reportedly accepting a payoff and a weekly stipend from his law partners for helping them duck a subpoena, Yordan stashed some loot for his family and disappeared to Hollywood to become a writer. At any rate, that’s the version Yordan related to the late Bernard Gordon. Another account, from Yordan’s own manuscript, was that his Tinseltown grubstake came from selling his mail order business to a fellow law student for three thousand dollars.

Ensnared with his typewriter at the Mark Twain Hotel in Hollywood, Yordan became frustrated after his numerous short story submissions were summarily rejected. After reading O’Neill’s *Anna Christie*, Yordan banged out *Anna Lucasta*, a sprawling 400-page opus about a struggling Polish family in Chicago. He found an agent in the telephone directory, got his play optioned in New York, and swooped onto the Great White Way in triumph—to discover that the option on the play had been unceremoniously dropped.

By then (1939) he’d already maneuvered himself into a position as factotum for William Dieterle. The German-born director was a skilled filmmaker who rotated between studios. At RKO, Dieterle helmed *Syncopation* (1942), an indiffer-



Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

ent paean to American popular music. Though ostensibly hired as a technical advisor, Yordan shared his first official screenwriting credit on the film. “I tried to fix it up,” he recalled. “I knew little about screenwriting. Dieterle had one of these intellectual concepts that made absolutely no sense, of combining the rise of modern architecture and the rise of jazz.”

After an abbreviated stint as an air flight instructor during the war, Yordan caught on as a house screenwriter for the King Brothers, who were grinding out second features for Monogram Studios. Former actor Arthur Gardner, a production assistant for the Kings, remembered the youthful Yordan as “very, very bright... a good writer and a forceful guy.”

“Phil was an opportunist with a lot of talent and although neither of us made a lot of money, we gained a lot of valuable experience,” recalled Gardner, still hale at 98 years of age. He credited his and Yordan’s future success in Hollywood in no small measure to their apprenticeship in cut-rate filmmaking with the Kings.

“Their real name was Kosinski. It was Frank, Maurice and Herman. They were from Boyle Heights, which was the principal Jewish neighborhood in Los Angeles at that time. Frank was the smartest brother and the leader. Maurie watched the money and Hymie just kind of tagged along. They originally made their money in slot machines that were all over town. They gradually gave that up when they found out about movies. Frank had a good story mind and supervised everything. I was at his elbow. After I left them to form my own production company (with Jules Levy and Arnold Laven), they continued to make films. I believe Frank King would have succeeded in any business. He was a sharp as a tack.”

The principal lessons absorbed by Yordan during his tenure with the Kings involved the practicalities of completing a feature within a short schedule and a tight budget. “The first words out of Frank’s mouth were that they never paid for a screenplay unless it was produced,” recalled Yordan. When he was hired, the King Brothers wanted to sell a project to Monogram with a budget of \$25,000. King’s initial treatment was unsatisfactory—“the plot was enough to give me cancer,” Yordan said—so he turned to production manager George Moskov for help.

“Moskov’s advice was to avoid a gangster film. Action and gunfire were costly. He suggested a suspense melodrama with one set. I dreamed up an imitation Hitchcock idea, all taking place in a roadhouse closed for the winter. Frank King liked the script, especially the low cost with very few extras. He couldn’t pay more than the minimum and had to cajole and flatter the actors to get them. The brothers managed to get Victor Jory and Pamela Drake for almost nothing.”

The Unknown Guest was the first King Brothers production to appear on the lower half of a double bill at Grauman’s Chinese Theatre. As Yordan noted with pride, “Subsequently, every film I wrote for the Brothers played Grauman’s. I had arrived.”

Working with Monogram and the Kings had unexpected benefits. According to Yordan, the major studios had an agreement with the Production Code Authority (dating back to the national crime wave of the 1930s) not to produce movies that might glorify actual gangsters by name. Monogram Studios and the King Brothers were not included in this pact (if, in fact, it even existed). Working beneath the PCA’s radar contributed to a box office coup with *Dillinger* (1945).

The King Brothers had upped their typically low budget line to six figures and signed the fearsome Lawrence Tierney to play the title role. With Tierney’s

authentic menace leading the way, *Dillinger* grossed an astonishing \$4 million—and Phil Yordan was nominated for an Academy Award for best original screenplay. He reportedly wrote the script with neophyte director William Castle and Robert Tasker, screenwriting partner of John Bright, who's served time in San Quentin with Tasker. [See Philippe Garnier's "They Made Me a Screenwriter" in the July/August 2009 *Sentinel*.] Neither Castle nor Tasker received any credit for their efforts. *Dillinger* was an early example of Yordan's life-long addiction to credit grabbing. He would become legendary for it, even for Hollywood. Later, he would pretend that screen credit didn't mean much to him, but there seemingly was always some reason why Philip Yordan was the credited writer—and other contributors' names were omitted.

Tenacity was a Yordan trait, as evidenced in a story he liked to tell about how he revived *Anna Lucasta*. While perusing *Variety*, Yordan was startled to discover that a black playwright, Abram Hill, had rewritten the play for the American Negro Theatre in New York. Hill's lighter, more comedic production received critical accolades and became a marginal sensation. Returning to New York, Yordan obtained financial backing, but in 1944 no one would stage a Broadway production with an all-black cast. Undaunted, Yordan signed an agreement with Abram Hill and producer John Wildberg. *Anna Lucasta* was revised with a gala reopening at the Mansfield Theatre on August 30, 1944. The play was a triumph, ran for 957 performances and spawned two movies. The first film was released in 1949 with a white cast, reflecting Yordan's original perspective on a Polish family. It was a box office flop. The second version, produced ten years later with a black cast, helmed by the capable Arnold Laven and starring Eartha Kitt and Sammy Davis Jr., was a qualified success. Nearly two decades later, Sidney Poitier thanked Yordan effusively for *Anna Lucasta*—he had appeared in the road company as an understudy, which "kept me eating for several years."

One wonders if Poitier would have been so effusive if he was aware that Yordan had hired several black writers to rewrite *Anna Lucasta* for the American Negro Theatre—and was sued by them when they didn't get paid. An article in the May 17, 1947 *Chicago Defender*, "'Unknowns Demand Cut in 'Anna Lucasta' Take" described the two-year-old joint legal action of Lee Richardson, the late Antoinette Perry and Brock Pemberton, who "worked on the original script at the request of Yordan" before the play premiered on Broadway. The article stated that Yordan proposed a settlement of the claim for \$6000 and two percent of the royalties. Abram Hill received no credit on the 1959 film. Neither did Richardson, Perry or Brock Pemberton. Only Yordan.

The American Negro Theatre was contracted to receive five percent of all production rights and two percent of the subsidiary rights for *Anna Lucasta* if the play went on the road with a different cast. After the show had toured for a few years, the 1944 Yordan-Wildberg-Hill contracts (filed with the Dramatist's Guild) mysteriously vanished. The ANT never received a penny for producing their successful version of Yordan's play. A quarter of a century afterwards, Abram Hill remarked that divisiveness over *Anna Lucasta* destroyed the American Negro Theatre.

Back in Hollywood, Yordan followed up his *Dillinger* success with a series of crime pictures. *Glamour Girl*, released as *Suspense* (1946), was produced by the King Brothers and touted as Monogram's first million dollar picture. It was an unusual polyglot of lust and murder set against the backdrop of a skating review, complete with musical numbers. Yordan got sole story and screenplay credit and played a bit part in the film.

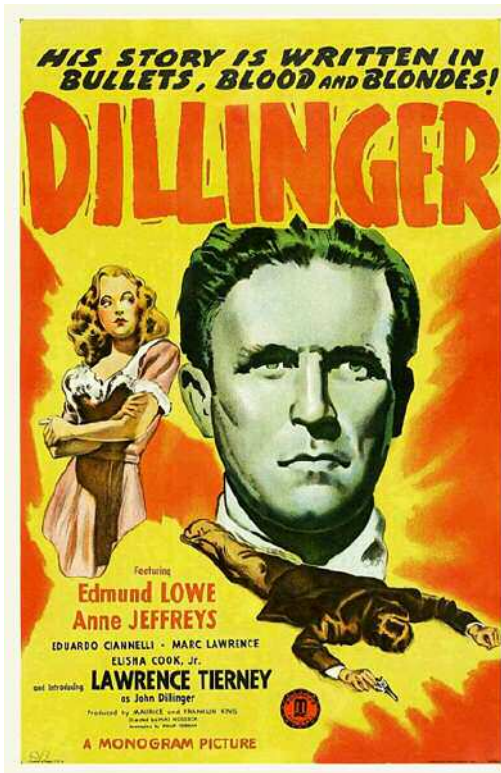
Whistle Stop (1946) was a turgid crime drama starring George Raft and Ava Gardner that marked Yordan's entry into film production. By this time, Yordan recognized that production deals were where the big bucks resided. The trade papers reported that producer Seymour Nebenzal, lawyer Herbert T. Silverberg, and writer Philip Yordan had formed Nero Productions specifically to make *Whistle Stop*.

The next Nero production was *The Chase* (1946), which featured a Yordan adaptation of Cornell Woolrich's *The Black Path of Fear*. This dream-like picture, directed by former Mack Sennett gag writer Arthur Ripley, is one of the most striking of postwar noirs (it begs for rediscovery in a legitimate 35mm print). Yordan failed to get the "name" female lead he wanted and settled for French actress Michele Morgan, an unknown in the United States. The picture wasn't a financial success. Yordan later asserted that he invented the gimmick of the gangster over-

taking operation of his luxurious car from the backseat—an odd declaration for a writer who has sole screenwriting credit.

Yordan had become hot enough in Hollywood to be represented by agent Irving "Swifty" Lazar. He evolved into a writer-dealmaker, packaging endless concepts, treatments and scripts to different studio executives. It was difficult for them not to be seduced by Yordan's obvious intelligence, conceptual ability, and growing track record. And yet ... where the hell were all these scripts coming from?

Yordan was hired by independent producer Walter Wanger to jazz up Aeneas Mackenzie's historically literate French Revolution story *The Bastille*. Under Wanger's detailed guidance, Yordan's draft turned into an exciting film noir. Alternately titled *Reign of Terror* and *The Black Book*, the film had beautifully crafted visuals courtesy of director Anthony Mann, DP John Alton, and production designer extraordinaire William Cameron Menzies. Yordan later complained, ironically, that Wanger had stiffed him: paying only \$10,000 for his *Reign of Terror* script.



By 1950, Phil Yordan had become the picture of a Hollywood "player": sartorially elegant, a sylvan home in Beverly Hills, a regular at the finest restaurants—he was exceptionally picky about food—and of course, a cultivator of beautiful women.

Although not conventionally handsome, Yordan's charm and power attracted a succession of women who became increasingly younger over the years. Early on, he'd had a torrid affair with actress Simone Simon, who jilted him. He was ambivalent about the other romances, noting, "Hit-and-run was all I had in my capacity." As for his wives: "I married them and supported them in a life style none of them experienced before they met me. That's all I had to offer. Only in my last marriage, did I offer...love." Yordan's fourth wife, Faith, whom he met in 1964 when she gave him a lift after his car broke down in a Beverly Hills parking garage, was the better half of his most enduring relationship. The union lasted until Yordan's death.

Yordan's limitless ambition was eventually rewarded by what everyone in Hollywood dreams of—the humongous lucky break. Yordan was hired by producer Sol Siegel to write a treatment about an underhanded lawyer named Gino Minetti, featured in the novel *I'll Never Go There Anymore*. Yordan's resultant screenplay, *House of Strangers* (1949), attracted minimal notice and was a box office bust. (It was rumored that Darryl

F. Zanuck pulled the film because its patriarchal dynamics were uncomfortably close to those of 20th Century-Fox president Spyros Skouras, who thought he was being caricatured).

Sol Siegel, ever resourceful, remade the same story five years later as the western *Broken Lance* (1954). It was a hit and Yordan won the Academy Award for Best Original Story. After receiving his Oscar, Yordan took out a two-page ad in the trades that read, "Thank You, Sol Siegel!" The gratitude was not reciprocated.

According to Siegel, Yordan publicly thanked him for a project "...he had nothing to do with." Although Yordan helped develop the characters, Siegel fired him after an incomplete first draft because the producer believed the script wasn't working. Yordan's unfinished script was rewritten by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, who replaced Yordan's dialogue with his own. He directed *House of Strangers* using his own revised screenplay. The Screen Writer's Guild decided that the credit should read: "Original Story by Philip Yordan; Screenplay by Philip Yordan and Joseph L. Mankiewicz."

Mankiewicz, who recently had won a Guild arbitration case on *A Letter to Three Wives*, sensed bureaucratic payback in the *Strangers* decision and, furious, refused to split the credit. Yordan ended up with sole screenplay credit for *House of Strangers*. He won his Oscar for *Broken Lance* based on whatever he did or did not do on *House of Strangers*. Years later, Mankiewicz sniffed, "Phil Yordan made a career out that screenplay." Yordan's version of the *House of Strangers* debacle? "Joe Mankiewicz tried to put his name on my screenplay as the co-author and Sol struck it off."

The blacklist proved to be a boon for Phil Yordan. With lefty scribes willing to work under "fronts" from the early 1950s on, Yordan became a screenwriter's employment agency. His most prominent proxy was Ben Maddow, who penned the scripts for *Man Crazy* (1953), *The Naked Jungle* (1954), *Men in*

War (1957), *No Down Payment* (1957), and *God's Little Acre* (1958). All of these films were credited solely to Philip Yordan. The deal Yordan struck with Maddow was to split the money down the middle, with Yordan assuming sole credit. Maddow was an accomplished poet and screenwriter whose noir credits include the underrated *Framed* (1947) and the classic *The Asphalt Jungle* (1950). Maddow, who would have to cope with his own demons after reportedly naming names to HUAC, believed Phil Yordan was, "one of the great characters of the world."

Determining who actually wrote the script of *Johnny Guitar* is particularly baffling. In the draft of his autobiography, Yordan claimed that MCA chief Lew Wasserman called him in to the Sedona, Arizona location to do an emergency rewrite, due to star Joan Crawford's recalcitrance over Roy Chanslor's existing script. According to Yordan, Wasserman had sold Republic the script and director Nicholas Ray as a package deal. If Crawford backed out, everyone would end up being sued, and MCA would be damaged. He described a desperate Nick Ray as being "in hock up to his ass" from gambling debts. Yordan rewrote the script on the fly, giving Joan her way by letting her have it out with Mercedes McCambridge in the finale. For his part, Ben Maddow claimed to have penned the entire *Johnny Guitar* screenplay, but recanted after seeing the picture years later.

Yordan fessed up that Maddow actually wrote the novel *Man of the West*, published under Yordan's name in 1955. In Patrick McGilligan's *Backstory 2: Interviews with Screenwriters of the 1940s and 1950s*, Maddow humorously recalled Yordan working the phones, negotiating the screen rights for "his" novel with Warner Bros. by claiming it was already published—then selling the book to Simon and Schuster by telling them a movie version was imminent. Having Yordan usurp credit for his work eventually drove Maddow to an analyst, but he never complained. Yordan, he noted, never wretched on a deal, and the two men remained friendly over the years.

Yordan's habit of constantly shopping scripts, book options, and story concepts all around Hollywood—while under contract to a single studio—created problems for him in the late 1950s.

He got two scripts mixed up and delivered a Fox script to producer Milton Sperling at Warner Bros., dropping the Warners script off to Darryl F. Zanuck at Fox. Zanuck threatened to blackball Yordan at all the major studios. Sperling then learned that it was actually Yordan's secretary who had written the draft he'd bought of *The Rise and Fall of Legs Diamond* (1959). Confronted by Sperling, Yordan confirmed enough of the woman's story to warrant being fired.

Several years after the *Legs Diamond* episode, Bernard Gordon was writing screenplays for Yordan in Spain when he was introduced to a partially crippled woman, known only as Clem, ensconced in a penthouse suite Yordan kept. She told Gordon that she'd worked with Yordan for more than fifteen years and had written the bulk of his scripts.

Clem also surfaces in Yordan's unpublished manuscript: "She was a secretary, not only skilled in shorthand and typing, but in how to fill out descriptions of sets and streets which I was loathe to write." Whatever the extent of his secretary's collaboration on his scripts, it seems her employment was terminated by Yordan shortly after Gordon met her in Spain.

Another professional *faux pas* proved more serious. After serving as a writer-producer for *The Harder They Fall*, Yordan's agent pitched Columbia studio head Sam Briskin about hiring Phil, provided he could keep an office on the lot and that his authorship of any scripts would be guaranteed. After the deal was made, Yordan continued to shuttle scripts around town and showed up at Columbia only on payday. Caught violating the terms of his contract, Yordan was forced to return the \$25,000 he had already been paid. He was barred from Columbia, as well as nearly every other studio in Hollywood.

His professional life at its lowest ebb, Yordan struck gold in Spain. Outside Madrid, Samuel Bronston was producing a biographical epic, *The Son of Man*, about the life of Christ. Nicholas Ray was at the helm and the script was a mess. Could Yordan come over and straighten things out? Whatever Yordan's professional standing may have been, no one had a better rep for screenplay damage control. With the studio system in disarray and his status tarnished, Yordan eagerly signed on with Bronston. According to Yordan, he flew into Madrid and

took immediate charge. He had Bronston and Ray halt production while he returned to Hollywood. Six weeks later he reemerged with an entirely rewritten script. He'd engaged Ray Bradbury to write the voiceover narration, used an anonymous Italian writer for the script, and, as usual, assumed sole credit for the screenplay.

The revamped opus, *King of Kings* (1961) firmly cemented the Yordan-Bronston partnership. Yordan's deal with Bronston was for \$400,000 per picture, with unlimited expenses. Samuel Bronston was an ostensible film producer who couldn't make it in Hollywood. He got access to funding through his relationship with Pierre S. du Pont, who signed blank performance bonds for the diminutive producer. Once the film had begun, du Pont, as the signor, guaranteed that all obligations would be paid in full without any approval other than Bronston's. With a blank check and an understanding of a postwar Spanish economy that, under Franco, was short of hard currency, Bronston established what amounted to an alternative studio system in Spain. Yordan lived like a feudal baron in Madrid and Paris. The gravy train had enough for everyone. Bernard Gordon observed that everyone, even those only remotely associated with Phil Yordan, appeared to be on the Samuel Bronston Productions expense account.

Yordan was fond of Bronston, who was born in Rumania, graduated from the Sorbonne, played the flute in the Paris symphony, and was the official still photographer of the Vatican. Bronston was fluent in a dozen languages, was a gourmet chef, obeyed a code of chivalry that became extinct in the sixteenth century, but, according to Yordan, he "knew shit about movies." Fox chairman Spyros Skouras offered Bronston \$1,000,000 for the rights to *King of Kings* during pre-production so it wouldn't interfere with George Stevens's biblical epic, *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. Yordan begged Bronston to take the easy payday, but the producer refused. Yordan concluded: "What I had underestimated was Sam's ego. This blind drive for recognition in an industry whose acclaim rarely lasted longer than six months."

Yordan continued his dervish production schedule on his own projects, bringing Bernard Gordon to Spain to write *Day of the Triffids* (1962) under his front. Gordon inked his contract with Yordan on the back of a Madrid bar bill, joining a rumored stable of writers already on retainer. In addition to *Triffids*, Yordan produced *The Thin Red Line* and *Crack in the World*—"to free up my frozen pesetas"—while working for Bronston. Rumors about Yordan's secret stable of writers were confirmed by several sources,

including actor-dialogue director Mickey Knox. Knox wanted to direct and "Yordan bought me a book called *Young Adam*, written by a guy named Alexander Trocchi, who was a stone junkie," Knox recalled. "I saw the writers in Yordan's basement while I was in Paris. I went down to get a trunk that I left and there were four guys with typewriters, working away in cubicles." Says Knox: "Everyone knew what was going on behind the scenes with Phil and his scripts, but he was a nice guy to me."

The *Young Adam* project died on the vine, but Yordan had many more irons in the fire. He engaged blacklisted writer Ben Barzman to write the script for *El Cid* (1961) with Bernard Gordon contributing a love scene reportedly included to woo Sophia Loren into starring. According to Norma Barzman, director Anthony Mann offered her husband the rewrite job after Loren turned thumbs down on Yordan's script. Asked if Yordan wrote any of his screenplays, Norma Barzman paused before saying, "Perhaps he did when he started, but certainly not in Spain when Ben worked for him."

Inevitably, the Bronston empire collapsed like a house of cards. The successes of *King of Kings* and *El Cid* had cloaked the fiscal inanity of the business operations. Bronston reportedly used a large portion of \$5 million in pickup money he and Yordan had convinced MGM to invest in *King of Kings* to pay off his huge personal debts. In addition to the firm's Croesus-like production costs and unlimited expense accounts, Yordan and producer Michael Waszynski were reportedly diverting large sums for their own purposes. A third Bronston epic, *55 Days at Peking* (1963) directed by a dissolute Nick Ray, was an abject box office failure. Its only notable achievement was in breaking through the blacklist—and Yordan's intransigence—by giving Bernard Gordon an onscreen writing credit.

The *55 Days* debacle led directly to the financial cataclysm that was *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964). At this point, Yordan's moneymaking schemes redefined the word *chutzpah*. Samuel Bronston eventually was compelled to return the bank completion guarantees to du Pont as the production company began hemor-



Phil Yordan backstage at the 1955 Academy Awards, holding his "Best Story" Oscar for *Broken Lance*, the western remake of *House of Strangers*. Joseph Mankiewicz was not amused

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rhaging red ink. Du Pont and Paramount Studios had jointly put up the funding for *Fall*—over \$20 million in 1962 dollars. With the ax poised above the golden goose, Yordan talked Pierre du Pont into a Byzantine deal called a “deficiency guarantee,” which provided him \$5 million to complete the picture. The scheme reportedly involved Yordan persuading an aging Barney Balaban, president of Paramount, to buy into the deal. The finale had Yordan hurrying to Rome where the last scenes were being shot and handing over the check to Bronston—who promptly paid him \$200,000 for services rendered.

The Fall of the Roman Empire (1964) was a ponderous three-hour bore that sank from its own weight at the box office. Although *Circus World* (1964) was already in production and would be completed, Samuel Bronston was finished. Owing millions to du Pont and Paramount, he declared bankruptcy, and eventually was found guilty of lying under oath about his Swiss bank accounts. (Note: Bronston was exonerated when the Supreme Court threw out his perjury conviction in 1973. “Bronston spent the last five years of his existence living in Houston in a room above a garage,” Yordan dryly commented.

Realizing his days with Bronston were numbered, Yordan returned to Hollywood to pursue independent production deals. He launched into *Battle of the Bulge* (1965) and talked his old colleague Milton Sperling—Harry Warner’s son in law—into signing on as a producer to help clinch the deal with Warners. Gordon recalled collaborating on the first draft of the *Bulge* script with Yordan, a first during their lengthy association. He also noted that Yordan produced only one viable scene.

Yordan maintained some of his momentum by underpaying an unhealthy Robert Siodmak to direct *Custer of the West* (1967), which was penned by Gordon and fellow blacklistee Julian Zimet. The Spanish production was highlighted by a memorable confrontation between Yordan and the ever-mercurial Lawrence Tierney.

“True to form, Tierney was a pain in the ass,” Yordan recounted. “His performance was fine, but he hounded me for money. He threatened my life... shoved the desk pinning me in my chair against the wall. The man was mad, utterly mad. Tierney had me pinned against the wall until my secretary returned with four thousand in cash. He was eventually picked up for fighting in a bar and kicked out of the country.”

After *Custer*, there was *Krakatoa, East of Java* (1969) and then a gradual descent into less important films as his influence, and the big money, faded away.

In the 1980s Yordan lived with his wife in a tract home in a working class San Diego neighborhood. For a while, he worked as an adjunct screenwriting instructor at San Diego State University. He spent much of his time knocking out scripts for low budget horror movies released direct-to-video. His new company, Visto International, disappeared through a figurative trap door. When Patrick McGilligan visited for an interview, Yordan spun his unique cobweb of fascinating stories, insightful observations, and outright lies. He wanted McGilligan to polish his memoir, and couldn’t comprehend why his life story wasn’t worth thousands of dollars.

It is impossible to quantify Philip Yordan’s authentic screenwriting contributions. Without access to production files or living colleagues, determining the origins of a script like *The Big Combo* is problematic. Yordan remarked to McGilligan that he’d hired a bookstore clerk named Dennis Cooper to write the first draft of *When Strangers Marry* (1944). Yordan further muddied the waters by lying about his work during the few interviews he gave, most notably to French director and film historian Bertrand Tavernier, who in 1962 published an extensive interview with Yordan in *Amis Américains*. It was only after the interview that Tavernier discovered the truth about Yordan’s “surrogates,” and that he’d been naïve to accept Yordan’s tales at face value.

It is also difficult to reconcile Yordan’s experience with blacklisted writers with a taped interview of him included on the DVD release of *Dillinger*. Once cognizant of Yordan’s use of Maddow, Gordon, Barzman and others, it’s hard not to gag when Yordan declares “We were all in it together against the government and the studios. . . .” Yordan wasn’t simply apolitical; he was oblivious. This was a man who bragged that he hadn’t read a newspaper until he was 50 and was so focused on his scripts, deals, and moneymaking that the rest of the world scarcely made an impression on him.

But it’s equally true that none of these writers would have had as much of

an opportunity to work if not for Phil Yordan. On the whole, he paid what was agreed upon and reserved his most blatant maneuvering for studio bosses and producers who could either afford to be flimflammed or should have known better. Yordan didn’t create the blacklist, but he certainly capitalized on it.

So what did Phil Yordan actually accomplish as a screenwriter? His own assessment of his screenplays is immodest, to say the least: “Mainly schlock, but several distinguished efforts such as *House of Strangers*, *Detective Story*, *Dillinger*, *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, etc.” There is no doubt but that Yordan was a skilled “spitballer”—a writer who can take an existing structure, premise, script or story, and punch up the dialogue, add bits of business, redesign or add scenes. Arnold Laven, who directed *Anna Lucasta* (1959) worked with Yordan on the shooting script. After emphasizing that they were revising an existing work rather than creating something original, Laven said, “I’ve worked with a lot of writers and producers who really didn’t know what they were doing. Phil Yordan was a complete professional and knew exactly what he was doing with that script.”

The script for *Detective Story* (1951), for which Yordan was nominated for an Oscar, might be the best example of his ability to take an existing work, in this case Sidney Kingsley’s play, and make it better. Gabriel Miller, author of a forthcoming biography of director William Wyler, notes that the original *Detective Story* screenplay (dated November 11, 1950) is annotated “2nd draft by Philip Yordan; Revised by Robert Wyler.” William Wyler’s brother was an uncredited contributor to *Roman Holiday* (1953) and also did considerable work on *Friendly*

Persuasion (1956) and *The Big Country* (1958). Miller notes that “The film is pretty faithful to the play; much of the dialogue is Kingsley’s. Yordan and Wyler rearranged certain sequences, sharpening the dramatic focus, added a couple, cut some lines, and, of course, had to get rid of the abortion element—though it still comes across.”

It is also worth noting that Yordan worked closely with director Anthony Mann on six major productions (*The Man from Laramie*, *The Last Frontier*, *Men in War*, *God’s Little Acre*, *El Cid* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*). Yordan might have used surrogates and parsed truthfulness but it defies logic that a director the caliber of Tony Mann would continue to work with a writer who couldn’t write, worked solely through fronts, or otherwise didn’t know his business.

Milton Sperling probably had it right when he tabbed Yordan as a uniquely talented man compromised by his own self-indulgence:

“Don’t let anyone tell you he couldn’t write. He could write exceedingly well. . . . He had a kind of Jungian memory of film, a kind of collective unconscious, a memory bank that would work for him in any given situation. He could have been one of the best writers. He had ability, no question about it. But his greed overcame his creative talent. He was born twenty-five years too late. Had he been in Hollywood in the twenties, rather than the late thirties, he would have ended up running a studio.”

“Filmmakers try to make good films, that’s their big mistake,” Yordan once remarked. He believed that anyone could make a superior film if they pushed ahead and got it done. Finishing the work and getting paid were the principle tenets of his filmmaking philosophy. His professional legacy should perhaps not be that of an accomplished screenwriter, but rather of a skillful producer. For Philip Yordan, moviemaking was always about the art of the deal.

His personality did, however, find its way into those films that reflected both his street smarts and his all-consuming ambition. Perhaps the signature Yordan line was clipped off by Richard Conte’s mob boss in *The Big Combo* (1955): “First is first and second is nobody.” Yordan must have savored that one; Conte repeats it several times.

Postscript

Shortly before old age began to dim his all-consuming quest for money, Yordan was visited at his San Diego home by a colleague of mine. He was ostensibly there to discuss special effects for a horror movie Yordan was trying to get made. “It turned out to be much ado about nothing,” my friend related, “but it was worth it just to spend time with him.” Yordan invited him for a lunch he cooked himself. Picture it: the legendarily enigmatic Phil Yordan, in a pair of Bermuda shorts, a stogie clamped in his teeth, grilling eggs and frankfurters.

“Kid,” he said, “You can do all these special effects in your bedroom. I’m gonna make you a million bucks.” ■



Richard Conte tries to impress Jean Wallace with all that money can buy in Yordan’s script for *The Big Combo*. Was this perhaps the closest Yordan came to a cinematic self-portrait?