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Joe Breen's Oscar

Stephen Weinberger

At the twenty-sixth Academy Awards ceremonies held on the evening of 25 March 1954, something quite remarkable occurred, although it attracted little attention at the time. As often happens at this event, one film swept most of the awards. *From Here to Eternity* won eight Oscars, including those for best picture, best supporting actor and actress, best director, and best screenplay.

In addition to the usual categories, there were four honorary Oscars awarded that night. One went to Pete Smith for his series 'Pete Smith's Specialities'; another to 20th Century-Fox for introducing CinemaScope; and a third to Bell and Howell for its numerous achievements. The fourth award went to Joseph Ignatius Breen 'for his conscientious, open-minded, and dignified management of the Motion Picture Production Code'. Breen, who was about to retire, had served almost twenty-one years as the head of the Production Code Administration, the body that censored virtually all films shown in American theaters. That the film industry was now bestowing its highest honor on its chief censor must have caused many writers, producers, and directors in the audience to roll their eyes at what seemed like the latest and not least of Tinsel Town's hypocracies.

During his time as the head of the PCA, Breen had cultivated a reputation that bore little resemblance to 'open-minded and dignified'. This was a man who rarely missed an opportunity to impress upon his listeners that before them stood someone who loved a good brawl. On 22 June 1934 when Will Hays, the head of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, introduced Breen to the directors of that body as his choice to head the censorship office, the new appointee began, 'Very well, gentlemen. I accept the job. But on one condition. And the condition is that you understand that I come from a race of people who have a long history of committing suicide – on the other guy.'¹ Jack Vizzard, who relates this story in his memoir about his ten years working for Breen, added, 'Joe never did disappoint them'.

A raconteur *par excellence*, Breen delighted in relating, often to people who had heard the stories before, and in various forms, how he had bested the Hollywood moguls. How, for example, at a meeting with Harry Warner to discuss the Catholic boycott of Warner theaters in Philadelphia, the stressed-out president of Warner Brothers began 'shedding tears the size of horse turds and pleading for someone to get him off the hook'.² Or how, at his first meeting with Harry Cohn, 'the Ogre of Gower Street', he went toe to toe with the fearsome head of Columbia Pictures. After glancing at Breen's portfolio, Cohn, perhaps to take the measure of the man said, 'What's this shit?' To which Breen responded, 'Mr. Cohn, I take that as a compliment ... My friends inform me ... that if there's any expert in this town on shit – it's you ... So if I have to be judged, I'm glad it's by professionals'.³

As chief enforcer and interpreter of the Production Code, Breen was certainly capable of being high handed and capricious. This document, which as of 1930 served as the Ten Commandments of the film industry, was the creation of Daniel Lord, a Jesuit and professor at St. Louis University, and Martin Quigley, a prominent Catholic layman and publisher of the *Motion Picture Herald*. Its stated purpose was to ensure that 'No picture should lower the moral standards of those who see it'.⁴ It then provided a detailed list of what could not appear on screen, such as detailed depictions of seduction, rape, murder, complete nudity, etc. Not only was Breen totally dedicated to enforcing both the spirit and the letter of the Code, but, according to Vizzard, he was quite capable of quoting passages in the Code that did

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not exist. 'The conspicuous example was, with that Old Testament figure up in the air again, "Remember, the Code forbids nudity, or the suggestion of nudity – in fact or in silhouette!"'⁵ This, of course, went well beyond the Code, which merely addressed actual nudity, and made no mention of suggestions of nudity.

However, to those who had the temerity to challenge Breen's reading of the Code, wrath was their reward. Joe would fire back, 'I don't give a fiddler's fuck [a favorite] whether it's in the Code or not. I won't pass your scene.'⁶

Breen would not only see himself above the Code, but on at least one occasion informed a new subordinate who was studying the regulations, 'Don't pay any attention to that thing. Just you listen to me. I am the Code!'⁷

Certainly, Breen had his supporters. This image of him riding into town like a U.S. marshal, determined to rid it of violence and sin, resonated well with many American communities. Shortly after his appointment, the *Terre Haute (Indiana) Star* announced that, 'Joe Breen, the two fist ed assistant to Mr. Hays ... now has his coat off and what he is saying about what is fit and what is right for the screen carries a terrific punch to the cowering, found-out direction and script writing ilk. Smut, glossed vice, faked romance, unhealthy sex appeal, will not pass Joe Breen if he can spot it. He is that kind of an editor.'⁸

Not surprisingly, what Thomas Doherty calls 'Breen's severe brand of Irish Catholicism'⁹ also earned him considerable hostility, and this extended well beyond the borders of America. In a particularly caustic article that appeared in the British *Film Weekly*, Glyn Roberts dubbed him 'the Hitler of Hollywood'.¹⁰

Aside from Breen's public image as a feisty and profane defender of conventional morality, there is also the bigoted side of the man that appeared in his private correspondence. Particularly during his early years in the Hays office, he made numerous and, at times, scathing anti-Semitic comments.¹¹ In 1932 a frustrated Breen complained to Martin Quigley that, 'I hate like hell to admit it, but really the Code, to which you and I have given so much, is of no consequence whatever ... But the fact is these dam [sic] Jews are a dirty filthy lot. Their only standard is the standard of the box office. To attempt to talk ethical values to them is time worse than wasted.'¹²

Later that year, he expressed the very same sentiments to Wilfrid Parsons, S.J., the editor of *America*, with whom he had worked closely on implementing the Code. 'It may be that Hays thought these lousy Jews out here would abide by the Code's provisions but if he did then he should be censured for his lack of proper knowledge of the breed. These Jews seem to think of nothing but money making and sexual indulgence. They and they alone make the decisions. Ninety-five per cent of these folks are Jews of Eastern European lineage. They are probably the scum of the earth.'¹³

In that same letter, Breen presented a way to force the studio heads to conform to the Code. Maintaining his stream of anti-semitic invective, he proposed that 'We shall have to get next to the men who have their money tied up in these producing companies. It can't be that the bankers, once their attention is drawn to the situation, will stand idly by and allow our people throughout the nation to be debauched by the Jews. Some bankers may – some Jew bankers. But you can't make me believe that our American bankers ... have fallen so low that they will permit their money to be used to paganize this nation.'¹⁴

Although it would take pressures from various sources to eventually force Hollywood's adherence to the Code, one of these turned out to be exactly what Breen proposed. Less than ten months after his letter, an article entitled 'Clean Scripts or No Cash Says Giannini' appeared in the *Hollywood Reporter*.¹⁵ It explained that A.P. Giannini, the president of the Bank of America and one of Hollywood's major sources of financing announced that he would support only those films that the PCA had cleared.

It is therefore not surprising that for many film historians, the image of Joe Breen is that of a belligerent, profane, and sanctimonious bigot. Yet, there is considerably more to his story. Although he presented himself to Hollywood as a self-confident and indefatigable defender of the Code, Breen's private correspondence reveals a very different picture. Less than a year after assuming office, he began questioning whether he was up to the demands of the job. In April 1935, he wrote to Maurice McKenzie 'Seriously, I feel for the first time in my life that I really need a vacation. I'm really 'all-in' – the going in the past year has been tough (underlined) – these babies out here are difficult people to deal with – I don't sleep – up every morning at dawn (underlined).'¹⁶

This obviously caused concern, if not panic,

Fig. 1. Joe Breen attending a 1935 Hollywood premiere accompanied by his wife and actress Una O'Connor (left). [Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives.]



among Code supporters. In the winter of 1936, Father Gerard Donnelly wrote to Parsons of his visit with Breen. He explained that at first Breen made it clear 'that he was sick of it all ... that somebody else could carry on the job ... that he was through'.¹⁷

Yet, over the next few days, Donnelly observed Breen's mood changes. 'He certainly isn't sick of his job. He is enthusiastic about it. He talks about nothing else. He told story after story of his fights with producers and writers and quite obviously took huge delight in the yells and threats and cursing. He was jamming unpleasant news down the throats of the studios – and loved it ... I could see that he still got a big thrill out of enforcing his decrees.'¹⁸

Breen's mood, however, continued to vacillate. In September 1937, he wrote to Martin Quigley saying 'I am convinced that unless I find some miraculous way to completely change these people out here – or get out of the job (underlined in red) – I am due for a nervous breakdown and an early grave'.¹⁹

Aside from revealing Breen's inner turmoil, these letters also suggest a change in his attitude

towards Jews. Although he certainly continued his criticisms of the studio heads, he did so without reference to their being Jewish. Instead, they appear here as 'tough babies' and 'these people'.

Jack Vizzard also noted this change in Breen. Before coming to the PCA in 1944, Vizzard had been a Jesuit priest, and regarded Hollywood and its creators, the Jews, as 'the Deceivers. It was their role to carry on in the mode of the Temptor ... and to present a glittering and seductive picture of the cities of this earth ...'²⁰ Reflecting on how his own attitudes had changed during his years at the PCA, he noted in an interview shortly before his death, 'I think the same thing happened to him (Breen) as happened to me. I came running out of the theological hills where I was studying for the priesthood to save the world from the Jews. They reciprocated by saving me from myself.'²¹

Moreover, Breen's relations with the Hollywood moguls were not only adversarial. After their initial confrontation, he and Harry Cohn developed a mutual respect and perhaps even a genuine fond-

ness for one another. This, of course, did not end their battles. These were not only in the nature of the relationship between studio heads and censors, but also because Cohn and Breen were natural brawlers who needed and respected worthy opponents. Vizzard relates that 'In his declining years, Joe used to seize a tuft of his pure silver hair in the tips of his fingers. "You see this?" he would query. "You know how it got this way? Not from early piety. From Harry Cohn.'²²

And after his short-lived departure from the PCA in 1941 to try his hand making films at RKO turned out to be a disaster, it was the Jewish heads of the studios who unanimously urged his reinstatement at the PCA as chief censor. Ironically, his former comrade in arms, Martin Quigley, was the one who most strongly opposed his reinstatement. The filmmakers fully appreciated Breen's worth. Despite the inevitable wrangling that would occur before he awarded their film the PCA's seal of approval, they knew that once this occurred, they could rely on his office to effectively represent them when ecclesiastical or state and local censorship boards raised objections.²³

After Breen had retired, Jack Vizzard asked if he would write about his years at the PCA. 'He waved off the suggestion with a touch of irritation. "Jack", he said, "I have too many friends in the industry, and I wouldn't want to say anything to embarrass them".'²⁴

Insofar as Breen's profane side is concerned, here too the issue seems more complicated than it first appeared. According to those who worked closely with him, it was often out of necessity that Breen resorted to profanity. Geoffrey Sherlock, who succeeded Breen as head of the PCA in 1954, explained that 'He would only be profane for a purpose, when he was talking to producers trying to give him a snow job ... He was very blunt when he wanted to be. He was a very capable man. He could be deliberate and charming when he wanted to be, and he could switch in a minute.'²⁵

Jack Vizzard confirms this impression. 'In the autumn of his years, I once asked Breen about the ease with which he reverted to sulphurous language, and he replied without ruffle that he had used polite language when he first came to Hollywood, but it was not the idiom of the time or the place, 'and they thought I was a sissy. I had to show them I meant what I said.'²⁶

Regarding the decision to award Joe Breen an

Oscar, Vizzard suggests that this was not widely popular, and that it occurred largely through the influence of producer Walter Wanger, a member of the Academy's board of governors.²⁷ Yet, regardless of how this award came about, whether through arm twisting or as a reward for long and valued service, the question might nonetheless be asked whether Breen actually deserved an Oscar. Could a censor, and especially one with Breen's personality, improve the movie industry? And, if so, did Hollywood benefit as much from his contributions as it did from those of Pete Smith, Bell and Howell, and Fox's Cinema-Scope?

In terms of his services to the business side of the industry, there is little question about the significance of his accomplishments. Numerous studies have shown that by diligently enforcing the principles of the Production Code, Breen fully satisfied the major goals behind the creation of the Production Code Administration. Hollywood's decision to commit itself to making 'moral films' had little to do with morality and everything to do with business. According to Shurlock, 'First, our purpose was to preserve proper standards in making motion pictures. That's a nice, round fat phrase that means not very much, if you want to pin me down. If you want to know what the primary purpose was, it was to stop the proliferation of state censor boards.'²⁸

In this regard, Breen succeeded admirably in significantly reducing the costs of satisfying local and foreign censors. After just six months with Breen at the helm of the PCA, the studios claimed to have saved over a million dollars.²⁹ Indeed, the PCA functioned so well that the continued need for state and local censorship boards was in question. The headline story in the 30 September 1936 *Variety* was 'Picture Censors Jittery. Joe Breening to Kayo Their Jobs. Self-Regulation by Hollywood at the Source Leaves Little or Nothing for Sunday Censor Bodies to Do'.³⁰

It is really when considering Breen's effects on the artistic side of filmmaking that historians are much more critical of his influence. This issue is especially important because it goes beyond the case of a particular individual, and addresses the general problem of censorship and the arts. Certainly, there is every reason to be critical of censorship, particularly the type that Breen oversaw. To allow some to decide what all other adults should and should not see is inimical to the fundamental ideals of a liberal democracy. And yet, while prior

Fig. 2. Donna Reed and Montgomery Clift in *From Here to Eternity* (1953). A good film, but better without Breen?



restraint certainly merits condemnation, the question still remains as to whether this is necessarily harmful to art. Does the environment for the artist improve as censorship lessens, and deteriorate as censorship intensifies? And, in the case of this study, did the quality of films decline while Breen headed the PCA?

While scholars have grudgingly acknowledged that some truly fine films appeared during Breen's tenure, they have quickly qualified this by pointing out that his overall effect was harmful. Frank Walsh, for example, argues that 'for every *Citizen Kane* there were hundreds of films that would not have challenged the intelligence of a twelve-year-old.³¹ Leonard Leff and Jerold Simmons acknowledge that *From Here to Eternity* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* were outstanding films, but ask how much better they would have been without Breen's influence.³² Gerald Gardner points out, with obvious hyperbole, that Breen created truly oppressive conditions for filmmakers, and that 'One of the major miracles of the twentieth century, to stand beside the Salk vaccine and the election of Harry Truman, is that

so many memorable movies were produced within the suffocating restraints of movie censorship ... Like the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto, who, despite domination and humiliation, managed to ... create "a theater in a graveyard", Hollywood filmmakers turned out a succession of films that belie the conditions of their creation ...'.³³ Still others, such as Mark Viera, claim that the real and lasting damage Breen caused was not so much to new films, but to those made before the Code. If studios wished to reissue them, Breen insisted that they fully meet the current moral standards. As a result, the studios compromised by cutting the original negatives, in many cases permanently damaging these works.³⁴ And while Richard Schickel praises the outstanding films that appeared during Breen's tenure, he also wonders about the many other fine films that might have appeared if Breen and the Code had not discouraged their making. 'Being happy with some of what we have is not the same as being pleased about everything we missed.'³⁵

There is little question that in 1934 Breen came



Fig. 3. John Huston, the writer/director of *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), directs his father Walter in the cameo role of Captain Jacobi. Lee Patrick and Humphrey Bogart behind the camera. George Eastman House.

to his position ready and willing to 'knock heads' with filmmakers. While he was not a radical departure from previous censors, he was certainly the most rigorous and independent.³⁶ This was not only due to a pugnacious character, but to developments that strengthened the office in the months just before and after his arrival. First, in March 1933, Will Hays had already instructed James Wingate, Breen's predecessor, to be more rigorous in implementing the Code. Second, in April of the following year, the Catholic Bishops Committee announced the creation of the Legion of Decency. This body would serve as an effective pressure group, threatening to boycott those films the bishops deemed morally dangerous for Catholics. Rather than regard this as an unwanted intrusion, both Breen and Hays saw it as a way to pressure the studios to work within the Code. Indeed, Will Hays welcomed the Legion 'as the moral force from the Catholic Church that gave the coup de grace to Code breakers ... I saw it as a "defense" of the moral standards we had ourselves adopted'.³⁷ And third, in July, as the result of considerable pressure, the MPPA's board of directors abol-

ished the Producer's Appeals Board. In place of this body, which had a history of reversing decisions by the censors, it established a new appeals board located in New York, which in virtually every instance would support the censors over the filmmakers.

If Breen enjoyed a level of authority and independence that others lacked, he also differed in another important aspect. While he could be frustrating in pointing out where scripts ran afoul of the Code, unlike Wingate, who merely identified problems, Breen regularly went beyond this, offering creative suggestions to satisfy both the filmmakers and the Code. In the introduction to his book on American censorship of British films, Anthony Slide expressed surprise at how, after reading through the files of the PCA, his opinion of Breen and his staff changed. While initially thinking of them as 'puritanical reactionaries hindering and frustrating creative talent', in the end he came to regard them as 'the equal of that found among many British and American filmmakers. Their understanding of the filmmaking process was extraordinary Joseph I. Breen and his associates contributed as much to world

cinema as did Hollywood's leading producers, directors, and screen writers.³⁸ Just as opinions about Breen ran the gamut from praise and admiration to criticism and bitterness, the same is true of the films made during his tenure. Some were truly outstanding and are among the very best American films ever made. Others were totally devoid of artistic worth. Under strictly enforced censorship one would certainly expect the latter, but probably not the former. Great cinematic art during 'the Breen period' seems an anomaly. Yet, remarkably, many of Hollywood's greatest directors made some of their finest films and established their reputations while Joe Breen held sway at the P.C.A.

In this regard, John Huston, Billy Wilder, and Elia Kazan are of particular importance. They are not only among America's finest and most acclaimed filmmakers, but they often chose materials or subjects that were in clear violation of the Production Code. Yet, time and again, these men demonstrated that one could create works of real artistic merit and still receive the PCA's seal of approval. Moreover, each of these men has commented in some detail on censorship and its effect on his work.

In the case of John Huston, it was his successful screen writing career at Warner Bros. that led to an opportunity to direct. His choice was to film Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*. This decision surprised Warner executives because the studio had already filmed it twice, first in 1931 and then in 1936. However, neither of these versions had been an artistic or commercial success, nor, Huston felt, did they bear much faithfulness to the novel.³⁹

It was obvious, though, that if he followed the novel too closely, Huston would run afoul of the censors. Hammett had created a dark and disturbing world for his hero, Sam Spade, to negotiate. Spade himself was a 'hard-boiled' detective who was having an affair with his partner's wife. Hammett populated this world with a heroine who used her considerable sexual charms to manipulate men. There was also an effeminate Armenian, and a corpulent and ruthless villain with impeccable manners who employed a young psychotic killer. The story also abounded in violence and alcohol.

Being faithful to Hammett and satisfying Joe Breen must have been an enormous challenge. And yet, Huston's considerable literary abilities and his familiarity with the censorship system served him well. On 16 May 1941, Breen sent his reaction to the script. Considering the nature of the material Huston

was working with, the requested changes were surprisingly few and minor. Breen asked that the violence and drinking be toned down; that the Armenian appear less obviously a 'pansy'; and that he not put his arm around the young killer. Spade's 'illicit sex affair' with both his partner's wife and the ruthless heroine must not be expressed. Breen was also bothered by the fat man's constant use of the expression, 'By Gad', probably because it sounded vaguely sacrilegious.⁴⁰

Huston made most of the changes Breen had requested yet managed to retain the unsettling and murky atmosphere Hammett had created. While working within the Code, and never being overt, Huston provided sufficient material so that the more sophisticated viewers would have no doubts about Spade's sexual activities or the Armenian's homosexuality. Huston did limit Sidney Greenstreet to three 'By Gads'.

The film, of course, was an immediate and enormous success in America and abroad, and is a well-established Hollywood classic. It received Academy Award nominations, for Best Picture, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Adapted Screenplay, although it failed to win an Oscar. When the American Film Institute compiled its list of the best 100 American films, *The Maltese Falcon* placed twenty-third.

In his autobiography, *An Open Book*, John Huston made a number of interesting observations about the censorship system. While absolutely opposed to it, he also acknowledged that 'no picture of mine was ever really damaged by the censors. There was usually a way around them.'⁴¹ *The Maltese Falcon* certainly confirms Huston's judgement.

He also noted that at times censorship could actually force screen writers to do better work than they might have done otherwise. He discussed a scene in *The Asphalt Jungle* in which a corrupt lawyer committed suicide. Since the Code forbade suicide, the censors duly rejected the scene. No man in his right mind, they maintained, takes his own life. The scene, however, was essential to the film. 'So I came up with an idea to which they agreed. I had him write the note [to his wife] and – like a writer who is dissatisfied with what he's done – crumples it up ... He tries again and crumples another sheet of paper; he's incapable of lucid thought. He just shoots himself. This was enough to indicate, for the censor's purposes, that he was not in his right mind. It turned out to be a better scene for the changes.'⁴²

What Huston described is something that many others have pointed to as the unintended and counterintuitive 'benefits' of censorship. Rather than necessarily crushing creativity, censors can have the opposite effect of forcing creative people to become more creative. Years before the Production Code, when Hollywood was experimenting with other forms of censorship, the much admired screenwriter, Paul Bern made this very observation. He noted that, 'The restraints it imposes are not necessarily harmful. The fade out is often much more effective and naughtier than the full scene would be if played through.'⁴³ Although this was the case with his two predecessors, it was particularly true during the Breen administration that screen writers wrote with greater sophistication. Out of necessity they learned the art of indirection, successfully appealing to the audience's imagination.⁴⁴

Interestingly, Huston concluded his comments about censors not by encouraging writers to do as he did, and regard the prohibitions as opportunities to improve their work, but to do the very opposite. He wrote that, '... I wouldn't recommend trying to outfox the motion picture code as a way to achieve storytelling success. The censors were responsible for doing grievous damage to many films.'⁴⁵ Unless he was implying that other writers were simply not up to his abilities, this seems very odd advice from a man who successfully and consistently 'outfoxed the motion picture code'. Indeed, if some films did suffer from the restrictions of the code, the blame perhaps should rest at least as much with the shortcomings of the writers or directors as with the rigidity of the censors.

If Breen saw problems turning Hammett's work into a film, he regarded the novels of James M. Cain as so fundamentally incompatible with the Code as to be unfilmable. Although Paramount had acquired the rights to *Double Indemnity* in 1935, Breen had successfully blocked its filming until 1943, when the studio decided to proceed with a script. Breen, of course, did his best to discourage the enterprise. In his letter of 15 March 1943, in which he listed the many problems the novel posed, he began by warning '... because of the number of elements, the story is in violation of the provisions of the Production Code and, as such, is almost certain to result in a picture which we would be compelled to reject'.⁴⁶ On the face of it, there is much to support Breen's evaluation. The story dealt with a woman and her insurance agent lover who murder her husband for

his life insurance. The issue of adultery, the fact that the crime is presented in great detail, and that the murderers commit suicide in the end rather than being punished by the state were among the more serious problems. Moreover, the insurance agent revealed some noble qualities, and this also was unacceptable. Criminals could not possess redeeming qualities.

Despite the obvious problems, Paramount moved ahead, hiring Billy Wilder as screen writer and director. For this project, Wilder teamed with Raymond Chandler to write the script. Despite their eventual dislike of one another, they produced a brilliant screenplay that Breen eventually accepted. In the ongoing process of submitting and revising the script, the fact that Breen had surprisingly few criticisms is a testament to Wilder's skill.⁴⁷

Just as Huston described how the Code forced him to become more creative and improve a key scene from *The Asphalt Jungle*, the same appears to have occurred with Wilder's *Double Indemnity*. Perhaps the most powerful scene in the film occurs when Fred McMurray kills his lover's husband. Since the Code forbade the graphic depiction of murder, Wilder focused on Barbara Stanwyck's malevolent smirk and glowing eyes as she listens to her husband struggle before his neck is broken. The effect is probably far more chilling for the audience than if it had viewed the actual murder.

Upon its release, *Double Indemnity* earned universal accolades. An article in *The Times* described producers hailing the script as 'an emancipation for Hollywood writing'. It then went on to explain that films like *Double Indemnity* were possible not because of an easing of censorship, but because 'Hollywood is learning to use finesse in dealing with a variety of different plot situations, which if treated objectively or obviously would be unsuitable'.⁴⁸ Even the Catholic newspaper, *The Tidings*, praised *Indemnity* for proving that 'there is no perfect crime ... and that those of criminal tendencies ... now may reflect [on] what happened to the characters who perpetrated this one'.⁴⁹

Double Indemnity went on to receive seven Academy Award nominations, including those for Best Picture, Best Actress, Best Director, and Best Screenplay, although like *The Maltese Falcon*, it won no Oscars. It is thirty-eighth on the American Film Institute's list.

Although he must have chafed under the constant scrutiny of the censors, Wilder regarded cen-

sorship as merely part of the process of filmmaking. Like Huston, he learned to work around the censors, and found that using humor with sensitive subjects often achieved good results. In discussing *Some Like It Hot*, he explained that '... the scene between Marilyn Monroe and Tony Curtis on the boat. That is just one laugh after another. That, the censors forgave me because it was funny ... I was fair with them [the censors] and they were fair with me, except one or two exceptions ...'.⁵⁰

However great the risks Paramount took that *Double Indemnity* might never receive a PCA seal of approval, these paled in comparison to those Warner Bros. assumed in deciding to bring *A Streetcar Named Desire* to the screen. On the face of it, one might wonder just what possessed Charles Feldman, the independent producer, to purchase the screen rights to Tennessee Williams' play, and Jack Warner to finance and distribute the movie. Although *Streetcar* was hailed as one of the great monuments of the American theater, Broadway did not have to deal with the Code, the PCA, or Joe Breen. With its violence, smoldering sexuality, nymphomania, homosexuality, and rape, it is difficult to imagine a

work being more overtly in violation of the Code. Indeed, it might even seem as if Warner and Feldman were thumbing their noses at the entire censorship apparatus.

Elia Kazan had directed the play on Broadway, but had little desire to do a film version. It was Williams, fearing that Hollywood would mangle his work, who convinced Kazan to take on the project. At this point in his career, Kazan was the most admired and successful director in America, with a reputation for toughness and integrity.

By 1950, the PCA, with Breen at its head, had been functioning for over fifteen years, and the censorship process was quite familiar to all concerned. It was clear to all that problems existed with *Streetcar*, and hard negotiations lay ahead, along with rewriting, adjustments, and deletions. Breen's memo of April 1950 to Jack Warner identified the major problem areas, but also offered suggestions to make these acceptable. Geoffrey Shurlock, who would succeed Breen as head of the PCA in 1954, and Jack Vizzard were the PCA officials who negotiated changes with the studio.

Breen's memo identified three difficulties: First



Fig. 4. Fred MacMurray in Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944). A risky proposition improved by the Code?

was the fact that Blanche's husband, Alan Grey, was a homosexual and that he had committed suicide. Second was Blanche's obsession with sex, 'and particularly to sex attraction for young boys that seems to verge on perversion of a sort'.⁵¹ Breen also presented solutions to these problems which Warner and Kazan eventually accepted. All direct references to Alan's homosexuality were eliminated, and he was merely presented as sensitive and ineffectual. And Blanche, distraught over the tragedy of her husband's death, would be presented as obsessed with 'searching for romance and security not gross sex'.⁵²

It was the third problem, Stanley's rape of Blanche, that proved most difficult. The censors suggested either that the rape be handled as Blanche's delusion or else that Stanley stopped his attack when he realized Blanche had gone insane. While Warner and Feldman were amenable, Kazan was not. If the rape was removed, he threatened to leave the project, which, in turn, meant that Williams would also leave, and the entire project would collapse. In the end, under heavy pressure from Warner and Feldman, Breen relented, but insisted that the rape must be handled 'by suggestion and delicacy' and the ending be changed so that Stanley be punished for this act.⁵³

This was a significant concession from Breen. Up to this point, he had maintained that rape was absolutely incompatible with the Code, and could not appear in any form. Some have suggested that Breen feared that if he did not give in, Warner would go ahead and distribute the film anyway.⁵⁴ The play's reputation and the notoriety that would inevitably result from a censorship squabble could attract huge audiences. It was only four months earlier that Vittorio De Sica had refused to make the cuts in *The Bicycle Thief* that Breen had demanded, and the film nonetheless played in art houses and independent theaters and did quite well. Furthermore, as Geoffrey Shurlock pointed out, the very reason for the PCA's creation was to smooth the way for Hollywood's product not to block it. 'We were in the business of granting seals. The whole purpose of our existence was to arrange pictures so we could give seals. You had to give a seal.'⁵⁵ Faced with an intransigent director, and pressured by a determined producer and studio head, Breen really had little choice. Also, by this point, Breen himself seems to have mellowed, and as Jack Vizzard observed, he 'was beginning to get good natured'.⁵⁶ He was approving films that he would have rejected earlier.

Having reached agreement with the censors on all the key issues, Kazan proceeded with the film. On its completion, he confidently reassured a jittery Jack Warner that the film would receive a seal of approval. 'I do not really think we will have much trouble with Joe Breen ... The picture is good! ... We can have a perfectly clean conscience about the 'sensationalism in the picture – for absolutely none of it is for its own sake. And, I really think the picture's theme is deeply moral ...'⁵⁷

Kazan, it turned out, was absolutely correct. Yet, if Breen had loosened up, the Legion of Decency had not. While the PCA awarded *Streetcar* a seal of approval, the Legion awarded it a rating of 'C' for Condemned. The irony of the situation was not lost on ever observant Jack Vizzard. He noted that 'The instrumentality [i.e. the Legion] which Joe had helped invent in order to validate his job was now beginning to assume a proprietorship over it, and the "child" was clearly beginning to talk like the father of the man'.⁵⁸

The prospect of Catholics boycotting his film sent Jack Warner into a panic. Without informing Kazan who was away on another project, Warner delayed the film's opening and brought in Martin Quigley to make whatever changes he deemed necessary to satisfy the Legion. In the end, after a dozen cuts that amounted to approximately three and a half minutes of film, the Legion awarded *Streetcar* a 'B' (morally objectionable) rating.

What seems especially significant and certainly ironic about this entire situation is the relationship that Kazan developed with Breen and his staff, and with Jack Warner. The correspondence reveals that the artist and the censors developed mutual respect as they labored together to make a film within the Code that was true to the specifics of Williams' work. Indeed, in a letter to Breen, Kazan acknowledged that removing the issue of Alan's homosexuality improved the film, and that 'I wouldn't put the homosexuality back in the picture if ... it was now permissible. I don't want it. I prefer debility and weakness ...'⁵⁹ He also praised Shurlock and Vizzard for their flexibility and for suggesting ways to make Blanche's sexual obsessions clear to adults while leaving them vague to children.⁶⁰

Kazan saved his wrath not for the censors, but for Jack Warner, his employer. When they finally met, Warner presented himself as 'a victim of the Catholic hierarchy', and turned a deaf ear to Kazan's counter proposals.⁶¹ Realizing that he had no say in the



Fig. 5. Cut to fit the Code: Kim Hunter and Marlon Brando in Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951).

outcome, Kazan vented his anger in *The New York Times*, complaining that, 'My picture had been cut to fit a code that is not my code, is not the recognized code of the industry, and is not the code of the great majority of the audience'.⁶²

To Kazan's surprise, going public with this issue did not turn Warner against him. 'The next time I ran into Jack, he was as friendly as ever. I realized that you can't insult these people; there's no concern with morality there; only business'.⁶³ *Streetcar* turned out to be a commercial and artistic success. It received twelve Academy nominations and won four Oscars. It also ranks forty-fifth on the American Film Institute's list.

To conclude about Joe Breen's Oscar, there is certainly good reason to wince at the dedicatory statement accompanying his statue. 'Open-minded and dignified' might well apply to Geoffrey Shurlock; hardly to Joe Breen. He could be arrogant and abrasive, and early on, at least, he revealed a disturbing bigotry. He upheld the Code that Quigley and Lord created not only because it was his job, but because he fervently believed in it. He was the product of the very same cultural background that produced Quigley, Lord, Parsons, and Vizzard. Moreover, he caused some films to be delayed by many years and probably prevented some fine films from ever appearing.

At the same time, there is little question that he took his work seriously, and this meant not only upholding the Code, but conscientiously and creatively working with filmmakers to achieve their goals. During his two decades at the PCA with the Code being more rigorously enforced, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that films actually improved. Directors and writers such as Huston, Wilder, and Kazan had few complaints, and freely acknowledged that censorship on occasion had actually improved their films. Indeed, the gret irony of censorship is that it forces creative people to become even more creative. In reading through the AFI's top 100 list, thirty-four of these films, including eight of the first twelve, appeared between 1934 and 1954. The Breen years roughly coincide with Hollywood's 'Golden Age'.

Did Joe Breen deserve the Oscar? The facts speak for themselves.

Notes

1. J. Vizzard, *See No Evil. Life Inside a Hollywood Censor* (New York, 1970), 51.
2. *Ibid.*, 50.
3. *Ibid.*, 51.
4. R. Moley, *The Hays Office* (New York, 1945), 241. The entire document appears as Appendix E.
5. Vizzard, *See No Evil*, 102.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 103.
8. *Terre Haute Star* (17 July 1934), 4.
9. T. Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood. Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York, 1999), 327.
10. M. Vieira, *Sin in Soft Focus; Precode Hollywood* (New York, 1999), 195.
11. Several scholars have commented on Breen's anti-semitism. Gregory Black referred to him as 'a rabid anti-Semite'. G. Black, *Hollywood Censored. Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (Cambridge, 1994), 170. Mark Vieira argues that he was not anti-Semitic. Vieira, *Sin*, 210.
12. Joe Breen letter to Martin Quigley, 1 May 1932. Quigley Papers, box 1, folder 3, Georgetown University Manuscripts Collection.
13. Joe Breen letter to Wilfred Parsons, 10 October 1932. Parsons Papers, box 3, folder 41, Georgetown.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *The Hollywood Reporter*, 27 July 1934.
16. Joe Breen letter to Maurice McKenzie, 12 April 1935, Quigley Papers, box 1, folder 3, Georgetown.

17. Gerard Donnelly letter to Wilifred Parsons, Winter, 1936, Parsons Papers, box 3, folder 41, Georgetown.
18. Ibid.
19. Joe Breen letter to Martin Quigley, 25 September 1937, Quigley Papers, box 1, folders, Georgetown.
20. Vizzard, *See No Evil*, 20.
21. Vieira, *Sin*, 210.
22. Vizzard, *See No Evil*, 51–52.
23. Several authors discuss the benefits of having Breen heading the PCA. See, for example, R. Malby, 'Baby Face or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone for Causing the Wall Street Crash' *Screen* (1986), 22–45; Doherty, *Pre-Code*, 27; Black, *Hollywood*, 239; F. Miller, *Censored Hollywood. Sex, Sin, and Violence on Screen* (Atlanta, 1994), 86.
24. Vieira, *Sin*, 210.
25. G. Shurlock, *Oral History with Geoffrey Shurlock*, Interviewed by James M. Wall (Louis B. Mayer/American Film Institute Film History Program, 1970), 105–106.
26. Vizzard, *See No Evil*, 64.
27. Ibid., 157.
28. G. Shurlock, *Oral History*, 210.
29. Doherty, *Pre-Code*, 335–336.
30. *Variety* (30 September 1936), 1.
31. F. Walsh, *Sin and Censorship. The Catholic Church and the Motion Picture Industry* (New Haven, CT, 1996), 334.
32. L. Leff and J. Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono* (New York: Grove Press): 212.
33. G. Gardner, *The Censorship Papers. Movie Censorship Letters from the Hays Office, 1934 to 1968* (New York, 1987), xxiii–xxiv.
34. Vieira, *Sin*, 210; M. La Salle, *Complicated Women. Sex and Power in Pre-Code Hollywood* (New York, 2000), 207.
35. R. Schickel, *Matinee Idylls. Reflections on the Movies* (Chicago, 1999), 113.
36. R. Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1918–1939* (Madison, WI, 1997), 131–132.
37. W. Hays, *The Memoirs of Will Hays* (New York, 1955), 450.
38. A Slide, Banned in the U.S.A. *British Films in the United States and their Censorship, 1933–1960* (London, 1998), x–xi.
39. J. Huston, *An Open Book* (New York, 1980), 78.
40. Gardner, *Papers*, 39.
41. Huston, *Open Book*, 83.
42. Ibid., 84.
43. Paul Bern, 'Theory of the Silent Motion Picture', in J.C. Tibbets (ed.), *Introduction to the Photoplay 1929: A Contemporary Account of the Transition to Sound in Film* (Shawnee Mission, KS), 76.
44. Several scholars have made this observation. See for example, Leff, *The Dame*, xiii; Schickel, *Matinee Idylls*, 113; Vasey, *The World*, 126.
45. Huston, *Open Book*, 84.
46. Gardner, *Papers*, 45.
47. Ibid., 46–47.
48. *New York Times*, 19 November 1944.
49. *Tidings*, 11 August 1944, 9.
50. C. Crowe, *Conversations with Wilder* (New York, 2001), 156.
51. Behlmer, *Warner Brothers*, 323.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., 326–327. In this letter to Warner, Kazan recounts the details both of their meeting with Breen and the compromise they reached.
54. Leff, *The Dame*, 175.
55. Shurlock, *Oral History*, 254.
56. Vizzard, *See No Evil*, 137.
57. Behlmer, *Warner Brothers*, 327.
58. Vizzard, *See No Evil*, 138.
59. M. Schumach, *The Face on the Cutting Room Floor* (New York, 1964), 74.
60. Leff, *The Dame*, 175.
61. E. Kazan, *A Life* (New York, 1997), 436.
62. *New York Times*, 23 October 1950.
63. Kazan, *A Life*, 437.

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