



## The Front (1976)

**Production:** dir. Martin Ritt, Columbia Pictures

**Certificate:** 12

**Run time:** 95 minutes

**If you liked this try:** *The Hollywood Ten* (1950); *Edge of the City* (1957); *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005); *Trumbo* (2015); and *Hail Caesar!* (2016).

Directed by Martin Ritt, whose own experience the story parallels, the film follows an irregularly employed restaurant worker, Howard Prince (Woody Allen), who is asked by a friend Alfred Miller (Michael Murphy – fresh from successes in Robert Altman’s *M\*A\*S\*H* (1970) and *Nashville* (1975)), a writer blacklisted in Hollywood trying to sell scripts in television, to use his name on scripts to get work. Many blacklisted writers worked using pseudonym’s or other writers to front their work in this way (as depicted *Trumbo* (2015)), while other filmmakers moved from cinema to less prominent media of television, radio and theatre or to work on co-productions in the UK (the TV series *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1955-59) was amongst a number made by Hannah Weinstein’s front company for blacklisted Hollywood personnel).

*The Front* is a historical drama based in part on screenwriter Walter Bernstein’s own experience of the struggles of writers, actors and directors in the 1950s and 60s blacklisted by the UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC). Following the televised public HUAC interrogations of film personnel, the imprisonment of the ‘Hollywood Ten’ for refusing to ‘name names’, and some public backlash led by a group of A list stars calling themselves the Committee for the First Amendment in the 1940s, HUAC feared losing public opinion. In the 1950s HUAC’s work, the accusations, the trials, the blacklists, were done largely in private sessions and away from public view, but in collaboration with red-scare gossip columnists who would condemn those who stepped out of line or didn’t co-operate and applying pressure on employers and corporate sponsors, denying those accused of both due process, and the ability to defend themselves publicly (as illustrated in Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer* (2024)). *The Front*, made the year after the HUAC was dissolved in 1975, was one of the first films to dramatise the red-scare blacklist.

Ritt, an early victim of the TV blacklist, made his first film returning from a string on theatre successes, *Edge of the City* (1957) featured Sidney Poitier and John Cassavetes in an allegory for Ritt’s own experience of the HUAC recast as a dockside

struggle of union workers against corrupt bosses. It's themes of racism, class division, intimidation, and resistance, were ones Ritt would return to through his career, but illustrated the first loosening of HUAC's authority. While the dockside setting is an interesting parallel to Elia Kazan, with whom Ritt had worked at the Group Theatre and Actors' Studio in the 1930s and 40s, and who had publicly named names to the committee, who used dockside union agitation as a justifying metaphor for his own betrayal of his friends in *On the Waterfront* (1954). *The Front* allowed Ritt to return to the scene of the crime and be explicit about what had previously been hidden under allegory – illustrating not only personal dilemmas and betrayals, but the active role of media corporations and their sponsors, keen to toady to an increasingly totalitarian government for their own ends.

Woody Allen plays Howard Prince in his first serious dramatic role – and while he plays Prince largely as himself (or as his clumsy neurotic wisecracking screen persona) this is a standout piece of acting / casting – the known clown, playing serious against Zero Mostel's older worn-down jester, trying to avoid the seriousness of his position, two characters played against each other as similar personalities separated by age and experience.

The sucker punch of this fictionalisation of history comes in the opening frames of its final credits, bringing home some of the reality of all too recent history, making *The Front* a triumph over it. While the HUAC's reign has long been seen as a horrific anomaly, and the smattering of films that have dealt with the subject in the last couple of decades feel no need to justify why the McCarthyites are the bad guys, and in the post-cold war era *The Front* may have felt like a triumph over a historical footnote; but as Berthold Brecht (one of the original 'Hollywood Ten' who chose exile rather than face prison) said of fascism 'the bitch that bore him is in heat again'. Last year Jane Fonda, whose father Henry Fonda was part of the original committee, reestablished the CFA in the face of government, presidential and corporate interference in Hollywood.

**For further reading see:** Victor Navasky *Naming Names* (Viking Press, 1980); Frank Krutnik et al *"Un-American" Hollywood: politics and film in the blacklist era* (Rutgers, 2007); Thomas Doherty *Show Trial: Hollywood, HUAC, and the Birth of the Blacklist* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2019); Julia Bricklin *Red Sapphire: The Woman Who Beat the Blacklist* (Lyons Press, 2023).