



# Roger Corman Not Only *Loved* His Audience, He *Created* His Audience

THE DIRECTOR, RENEGADE PRODUCER AND GURU TO A GENERATION OF MOVIEMAKERS RECEIVES THE PRESS CLUB'S DISTINGUISHED STORYTELLER AWARD BY PETER RAINER

**H**ollywood is made up of all kinds, but Roger Corman is truly one-of-a-kind. From an early age, his love of movies was total, and remains vitally so to this day.

Over the decades he has been a director, renegade producer, distributor and spiritual guru to an entire generation of moviemakers that might very well never have existed without him. Tonight, the Los Angeles Press Club honors Corman with the Distinguished Storyteller Award for Excellence in Storytelling Outside Journalism.

As a boy, Corman moved with his parents, and his brother Gene, from Detroit to Los Angeles, where he was enrolled in—where else?— Beverly Hills High School. He graduated from Stanford with a degree in engineering but soon realized he wasn't cut out for the profession. What no doubt stayed with him was a passion for learning how things are

assembled with maximum efficiency—a passion which held him in good stead when navigating film's ultra-low-budget realms.

He started out as a messenger and low-level script reader at Twentieth Century Fox, where he rarely encountered a screenplay he could recommend. When he did, others usually took credit for the discovery.

Anti-authoritarian by temperament, Corman went into business for himself in 1954, producing *The Monster From the Ocean Floor*—both the monster and the ocean floor were fake—and *The Fast and the Furious* (no relation to the current franchise). He then joined up with the recently formed American International Pictures (A.I.P.) under the aegis of James Nicholson and Samuel Z. Arkoff and soon became its house director with such movies as *It Conquered the World*, *The Day the World Ended*, *Teenage Caveman* (starring a very young Robert Vaughn), and the ineffable *The Attack of the Crab Monsters*. The way it usually worked is, first you came up with a grabby title, then you figured out how to make the movie. Shoots usually lasted no more than six days, averaging 50 set-ups per day.

What's remarkable about these films is how, with a thrown-together cast and script and budgets of near-zero, they nevertheless maintained a distinctive style that made them unlike the movies of any other studio or filmmaker. The reason for this is not hard to decipher: Corman loved his audience. In large part, he *created* that audience.

Hollywood in the 1950s and early '60s mostly ignored the teen youth market, except for "problem" dramas like *Rebel Without a Cause* or *Splendor in the Grass*, films that

*Loved* His Audience,



framed adolescent angst from a socially conscious, mostly adult perspective. If you were screwed up, blame it on the world, or your parents.

Corman's movies, by contrast, which branched out from monsters to include beatniks and bikers and Edgar Allan Poe, were blissfully unpretentious. His works targeted teens not only because that was a smart business decision but also because he recognized that, like him, kids wanted to enjoy life on their own terms.

The one anomaly in Corman's career is *The Intruder*, starring William Shatner, a 1961 problem drama about racial integration in the Deep South. It's a fine film, perhaps his



Above: Corman received an honorary Oscar in 2009 acknowledging his contributions to filmmaking in the 1960s and '70s.

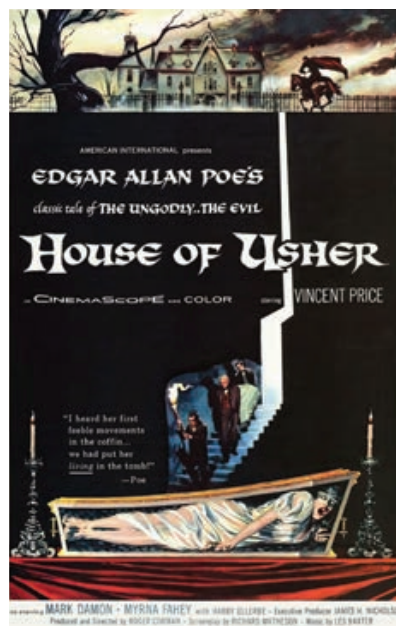
Top: Roger Corman married Julie Halloran in 1970, and they have four children. Left: Peter Fonda was one of the young actors who appeared in Corman's films. He starred in *The Trip*, written by Jack Nicholson.

Roger Corman with his daughters, Catherine and Mary, and wife of 53 years, Julie, who was his partner when New World Pictures was started and now at New Horizons Picture Corp.





Many actors and directors got their start in Corman films. Above, from left: Peter Fonda and Nancy Sinatra in *The Wild Angels*; Ron Howard in *Grand Theft Auto*, with other family members in credits; Jack Nicholson starred in *Little Shop of Horrors*. Below: Corman made Edgar Allan Poe adaptations like *House of Usher* with Vincent Price.



A young Roger Corman joined American International Pictures (A.I.P.) and became their house director.

best, but it sank at the box office. A lesson was learned: Make the action your text and the message your subtext. Looked at today, '60s movies like *The Wild Angels* and *The Trip* (written by Jack Nicholson, a frequent early Corman actor) better captured the giddy zeitgeist of the nascent counterculture era than many a more highly touted work.

Throughout his time at A.I.P., Corman made many dozens of movies, and his craftsmanship increased exponentially. The legendary *Little Shop of Horrors* was shot in two days and a night, and is probably the better for it. *X-The Man With the X-Ray Eyes* is one of the best films Ray Milland ever made, and features a great early performance by Don Rickles as a carny sleazo. Corman's Poe adaptations, including *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Raven* and *The Tomb of Ligeia* (scripted by Robert Towne), struck just the right tone of camp and Grand Guignol.

When he formed his own company, New World Pictures, in 1971, Corman essentially relinquished his role as a director and focused on producing a vast slew of movies from all genres: sci-fi, women in prison, blaxploitation, student nurses, hillbilly shoot-'em-ups, you name it. The only requirement, as always, was that the budget remain lower than the cost of a caterer on a big studio production.

It was during this era that the so-

called University of Corman reached its zenith. In exchange for paying them bupkus, he gave opportunities to a vast pool of newbie directors, writers and actors who were effectively shut out of the studio system. The roster of future stars is almost comical in its completeness. To name just a few, besides Towne and Nicholson, there is Martin Scorsese, Jonathan Demme, James Cameron, Francis Ford Coppola, John Sayles, Peter Bogdanovich, Ron Howard, Monte Hellman, Polly Platt, Joe Dante and Pam Grier. His wife, Julie Corman, became a prominent producer in her own right.

It's no exaggeration to say that the New Hollywood generation that came up in the late '60s and '70s, an artistic Golden Age, owes more to Roger Corman than to any other individual. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences cited this achievement in awarding him an honorary Oscar in 2009.

His artistic influence extends even further. At a time when the major studios had all but given up buying the work of the great international directors, New World distributed masterpieces by such legends as Ingmar Bergman, Akira Kurosawa, Federico Fellini and Francois Truffaut. Of course, Corman also knew how to successfully market those works, even if this meant putting Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* into drive-ins. Bergman, a kindred soul, was reportedly delighted to reach such a large audience.

In the final analysis, Corman's approach to storytelling is simple: It's OK to have fun at the movies. It's another way of saying, it's OK to have fun with your life.

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