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# A chat with Ed Asner

BY LARRY JAFFEE  
New York City

**F**orty-five years old; if I was in politics they'd call me "The Kid."

—LOU GRANT, upon learning he's being fired from WJM-TV, on a *Mary Tyler Moore Show* episode.

"The Kid," now fifty-three, is spending far more time in the political arena than in front of a camera these days. Since Ed Asner, running as a critic of the 1980 actor's strike settlement, won the presidency of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) in November 1981, he has:

- Incurred the wrath of the New Right by speaking out against U.S. involvement in El Salvador;

- Seen his *Lou Grant* series canceled on the heels of direct-mail campaigns by the Moral Majority and the Center for Inter-American Security that were aimed at advertisers and the CBS television network;

- Repeatedly locked horns with fellow actor Charlton Heston and Actors Working for an Actor's Guild (AWAG), a conservative faction within the SAG, over Asner's public political statements and his desire for a merger with the Screen Extras Guild;

- Spoken at, by his own estimate, "at least a hundred" political rallies and benefits this past year.

Having completed his supporting role in Sidney Lumet's upcoming picture, *Daniel*, Asner, like better than eight out of ten of his 55,000 SAG constituents, once again found himself out of work. But at the same time, a slate of thirteen progressive candidates was elected to the SAG's board of directors in November (defeating thirteen AWAG candidates), a development generally perceived in the industry as a vote for Asner.

*To what extent are the entertainment industry's unemployment problems tied to the nation's economic ills?*

At this particular time, there seems to be a very strong tie-in because of

interest rates. Interest rates have become so high that a lot of movie and stage projects — which are always funded with borrowed money — just won't be taking place.

*Have the Hollywood labor wars of 1980-1981 — the writers' and screen actors' strikes and the directors' threat of one — had a ripple effect?*

No, the business is suffering without the help of the strikes. Possibly, it's coincidental. But I don't think the strikes created the present money problems. Those money problems are part of the world we live in.

*Could the outcome of the SAG's board of directors election be interpreted as a mandate?*

It will be interesting to see to what extent the board of directors is willing to regard it as a mandate, because they have the power — through me — to further such ideas as a merger.

*Why haven't there been more celebrities as outspoken as you when it comes*

*to civil rights and politics? What are they afraid of?*

Well, the flak itself. And it's work informing yourself. The entertainer is designed to please, and as soon as he takes a political stand, he's immediately going to alienate a certain number of people. Still, I don't think it's always true that everyone gives a damn about a performer's politics. Even though I totally disagreed with John Wayne and his politics, I never stopped seeing John Wayne movies. I always paid attention to what he did, and appreciated a lot of it. The disappointed and fervent die-hards will fall off the vine, but the vast majority will continue to watch. In my case, I still regard myself as a viable performer who is quite bankable.

*Do you think the cancellation of 'Lou Grant' has had any effect on the business in general?*

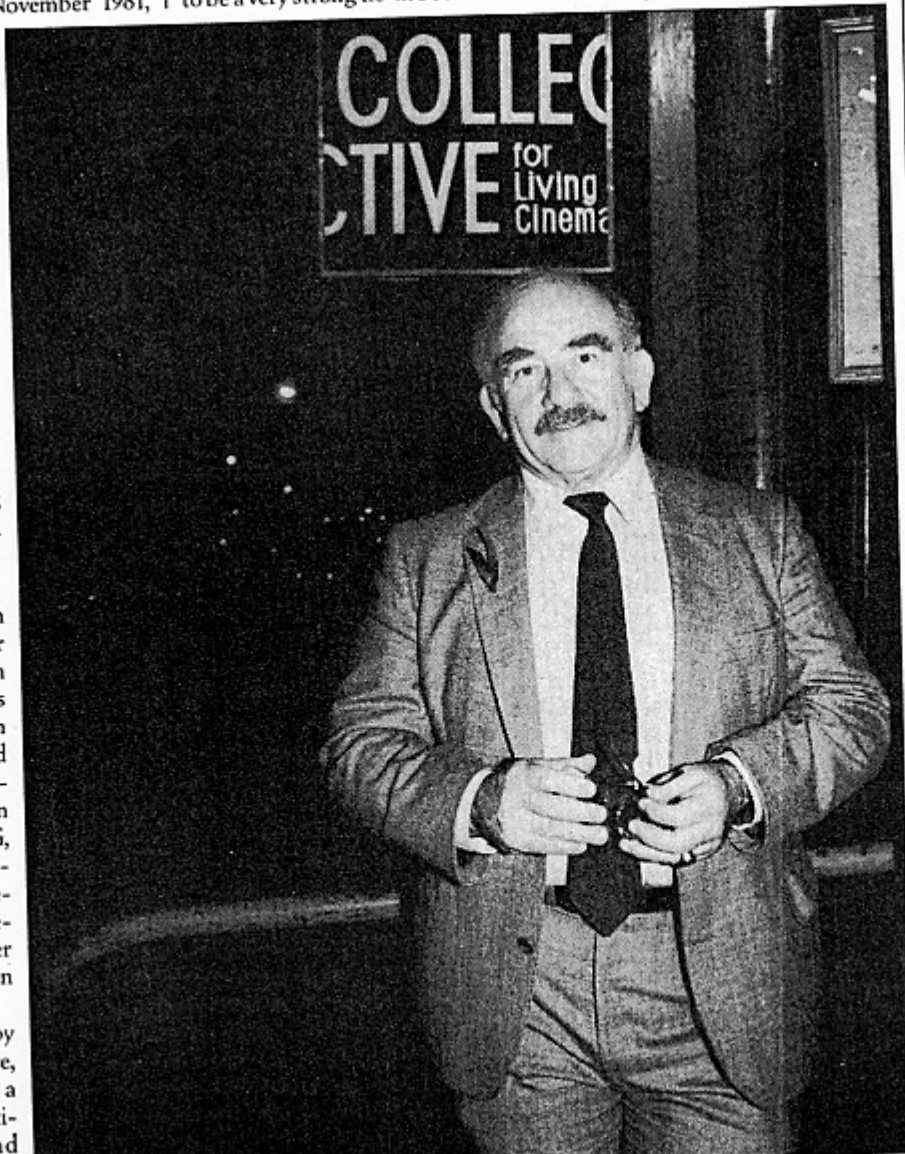
Every time there is a pebble dropped in the pool, it tends to raise the level of the pool. In this case, I'd call the level of concern obstructionism, as far as getting the job done. Therefore, a cancellation tends to throw the freedom of expression from the filmmaker, his overlords and studio bosses a little bit more off-stride.

*Do you think the public now distinguishes between Lou Grant, an easy-going nice guy and hard-working newspaperman, and Ed Asner, a liberal, left-wing activist?*

Without a doubt. It's not that middle America really knew what I was, or cared what I was. It was the El Salvador flash fire going through the papers and my connection with it, as well as Charlton Heston beating his drums and gums. The public could not avoid thinking about it. They really don't care, as long as you're satisfying their need to be either informed or entertained or titillated, but I think they resent being forced to hear about it.

*How would you answer the question posed in a recent magazine article: "What does Lou Grant know about El Salvador?"*

A hell of a lot more than most people. I read whatever I can on El Salvador. Plus, I've had personal contact with a writer and photographer, who have spent years there. Right now I'm taking around a taped interview of Carolyn Forché, who spent two years in El Salvador documenting human-rights violations for Amnesty International. These people keep informing me and reinforcing my comments. ○



Ed Asner in New York: "I still regard myself as a viable performer."