

Elia Kazan, now 87 years old, was one of the most important American film directors during the 1950's and 1960's, having directed classic films such as *On the Waterfront* and *Viva Zapata*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *East of Eden*, which launched the careers of Marlon Brando and James Dean. This past year Mr. Kazan was rejected, as he has been now for many years, for lifetime achievement awards by both the American Film Institute and the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. The reason for this is that in 1952 Mr. Kazan appeared before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) and informed on eight friends, all film writers and directors as having been, like Mr. Kazan, members of the American Communist Party in the 1930's. Mr. Kazan did not accuse the eight individuals of any specific actions injurious to the United States. Nonetheless, none of them were able to work in the film industry for many years, in some cases, ever again, as a result of Mr. Kazan's testimony. Mr. Kazan's testimony took place at the height of the McCarthy era when the HUAC was zealously looking for evidence of Communist influence in Hollywood. Mr. Kazan was under pressure to testify, as were other former members of the American Communist Party in the film industry, because failure to cooperate with the HUAC had led to many writers and directors being blacklisted by film studios, which made it impossible to find work. Movie critics are deeply divided over the decision not to honor Mr. Kazan. Some believe that, in the words of one member of the American Film Institute, "All that matters is the movies. You're honoring a person's body of work." Other critics disagree. "When you're honoring someone's entire career, says another critic, you're honoring the totality of what he represents, and Kazan's career, post 1952, was built on the ruin of other person's careers."

Should Mr. Kazan receive a lifetime achievement award? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: Critics have a responsibility to evaluate the quality of works of art in an impartial manner, without regard to which persons are benefitted or harmed by their evaluations. For this reason, it would be wrong of film critics to refuse to acknowledge the outstanding quality of the movies that Mr. Kazan directed because they (the critics) disapprove of his having named names before the HUAC in the 1950's. In this situation, however, no critic has denied, or refused to acknowledge, the excellence of Mr. Kazan's work. Instead, notwithstanding its conceded excellence, the critics have declined to honor Mr. Kazan with a lifetime achievement award. In light of the significant harms that Mr. Kazan knowingly caused in the lives of the individuals he named in his testimony, this decision of the film critics not to honor him as a person seems reasonable.

Case from the February 26, 1998 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1998.