

← Back to Original Article

Frank Pierson dies at 87; Oscar-winning screenwriter

Pierson was a three-time Academy Award nominee and won for his screenplay of 'Dog Day Afternoon.' He also served as president of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences.

July 24, 2012 | By Nicole Sperling, Los Angeles Times

A writer for as long as he could remember, Frank Pierson penned his most famous line, "What we've got here is failure to communicate," decades ago for the 1967 script "Cool Hand Luke." At the time, he thought there was no way such a refined line would be allowed to be uttered by the redneck crew captain who has just taught Paul Newman's Luke a brutal lesson. To ensure the line stayed in, Pierson wrote an entire biography for the captain, one he never needed to use because no one ever questioned the quote that has since become one of the most iconic in movie history.

That commitment to story and dedication to language helped cement Pierson as one of the top screenwriters of his generation, landing him three Academy Award nominations, and one win for his 1975 script "Dog Day Afternoon." It was one of the many honors awarded the filmmaker over his six-decade career in Hollywood.

Pierson died Sunday evening at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles after battling a short illness, said his manager, Susan Landau. He was 87.

PHOTOS: 2012 notable deaths

The son of an entrepreneur father and a screenwriter mother, Pierson began his career as an entertainment correspondent for Time magazine, before breaking into television as a story editor for the western "Have Gun - Will Travel." He worked on many television shows and moved into the movie business with his first film script, "Cat Ballou." The comedic western starring Jane Fonda and Lee Marvin landed him his first Oscar nomination. Two years later, he collaborated with novelist Donn Pearce on the adaptation of "Cool Hand Luke," about a chain-gang prisoner played by Newman who defies fellow inmates and prison guards.

In 1975, Pierson nabbed the Oscar statuette for his screenplay "Dog Day Afternoon," a script he found difficult to write having never met the man whose real-life story the film was based on.

"It was confusing; there were such contradictory statements made about him and who he was by everybody who knew him," said Pierson, in an interview with Contemporary Authors. "It took me several months before I was able to conceive of him, because until you have a character whose motivations you understand, there's no way of writing him consistently."

Though Pierson primarily identified with being a writer, sitting down most mornings at 10 and writing whatever popped into his head until lunchtime, he transitioned to directing with the 1970 film "The Looking Glass War." He also directed the 1976 remake of "A Star Is Born," starring Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson, and "King of the Gypsies" in 1978.

Pierson spent much of his career in service to the Hollywood organizations that helped make him a success. He was president of the Writers Guild of America for two distinct terms, taught at the Sundance Institute, was an adjunct professor at USC's film school and was the artistic director of the American Film Institute. He served as the 31st president of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences from 2001-2005 and was a governor of the writers' branch for 17 years.

"Young rock 'n' rollers always look to the old bluesmen as models of how to keep their art strong and rebellious into older years. For screenwriters, Frank has been our old blues master for a long time," Phil Alden Robinson, academy governor, said in a statement. "He was both a great and a good man. I miss him already, and I feel very, very lucky to have known him."

Pierson, born May 12, 1925, in Chappaqua, N.Y., served in the Army during World War II and received a bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology from Harvard University before launching his career.

Most recently, Pierson was working as a consulting producer and writer for the television shows "Mad Men" and "The Good Wife."

"He was a writer's writer: sharp and funny and clever and, most importantly, honest about the details that make one

human," Matthew Weiner, the creator of "Mad Men," said in a statement. "He was a great artist and made everyone around him better."

Pierson is survived by his wife, Helene; his children, Michael and Eve, and five grandchildren.

A private service will be held this week. According to the academy, a public memorial is planned.

PHOTOS: 2012 notable deaths

nicole.sperling@latimes.com