

Turner Classic Movies host talks Mank's lost Oscar at Rancho Mirage Writers Festival

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Ben Mankiewicz speaks during the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Rancho Mirage Public Library, February 1, 2023. *Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun*

The name Mankiewicz is a familiar one in Hollywood — and in politics. Members of this family are known for reporting behind the anchor desk, working on presidential campaigns, writing screenplays and directing celebrated films.

Ben Mankiewicz has been in both worlds as a reporter, TV news anchor and host of a film show on the progressive online talk network “The Young Turks.” In 2003, he joined Turner Classic Movies and became the classic film network’s primetime host in 2016 following the retirement of the late original host Robert Osborne.

On Wednesday, during his appearance at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival in conversation with fellow TCM host Dave Karger, Mankiewicz said his left-leaning politics are well-known. He described his beliefs as “not even moderately controversial,” and added he doesn’t appear on political shows anymore to avoid alienating TCM viewers.

“These movies bring people together, and it’s nice this is an area where people of all political stripes feel the same way about Humphrey Bogart, Joan Crawford and Bette Davis,” Mankiewicz said. “It’s a little challenging because when we write about the Hollywood Blacklist, we have to talk about politics and (TCM) gives me free reign.”



Ben Mankiewicz, right, speaks with Dave Karger during a discussion at the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Rancho Mirage Public Library, February 1, 2023.
Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun

Mankiewicz and Karger also discussed the recent buyout of TCM's parent company Warner Brothers by Discovery, and the impact CEO David Zaslav will have on the network. According to CNBC, Warner Brothers Discovery's total debt is \$50 Billion.

He said the channel's viewers hate change, don't want any commercials during films and are against adding colorization to black-and-white classics. He added films from the 1930s to 1950s are the network's "wheelhouse," but the network needs to make itself relevant in 2023.

"(Zaslav) is not going to (pay \$50 billion) on the backs of TCM," Mankiewicz said. "He's very connected and not in a weird way. She started the USC SHOAH Foundation with Steven Spielberg. Powerful brands in the industry have some influence over him, and he has some influence over them. I think it's going to be good and ultimately win in the end."

Karger mentioned the five Oscars between his grandfather Herman J. Mankiewicz, the screenwriter of "Citizen Kane" and subject of the 2020 film "Mank" starring Gary Oldman, and great-uncle Joseph L. Mankiewicz, who directed the 1950 film "All About Eve."

But where are those Oscars now?

Mankiewicz said Herman's Oscar belonged to his father, Frank Mankiewicz, and he and his uncle Don Mankiewicz sold items they owned separately or together such as the original script to "Citizen Kane" to Steven Spielberg to settle Don's gambling debts.

"Don asked my dad if he could sell the Oscar and give him a cut," Mankiewicz said. "My dad had it in a safe deposit box because it cost too much to insure. Because my dad was kind and wanted to help Don, they sold it and the thought was, 'Spielberg is going to buy it and it will be great. It'll be in a museum where it should be' But someone else bought it and we don't know what happened to it."



Attendees listen as Ben Mankiewicz and Dave Karger discuss Turner Classic Movies during the Rancho Mirage Writers Festival at the Rancho Mirage Public Library, February 1, 2023. *Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun*

When Karger asked how Mankiewicz is “indoctrinating” his young daughter Josie into the classic film world, he said “She’s not hostile to it.”

“She asks all the time, ‘Is it in black and white?’ and won’t want to watch it,” Mankiewicz said. “Every year during the holidays, we watch movies like ‘It’s A Wonderful Life’ and ‘Christmas in Connecticut’ and she’s coming along.”