

THE PROGRESSIVE INTERVIEW

by Ed Rampell

Ed Asner

Ed Asner is back. If you watched the Academy Awards, you saw his face beaming as *Up* won an Oscar for best animated feature film. Asner had the lead voice role in the movie, which was also a contender for best picture.

Asner's television credits stretch back to the 1950s and 1960s, with appearances on such shows as *Studio One*, *Naked City*, *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, *Route 66*, *Dr. Kildare*, *Ben Casey*, and *The Fugitive*. Asner attained stardom in the 1970s as the gruff but lovable Minneapolis TV newsroom producer Lou Grant on the long-running *Mary Tyler Moore Show*. After the beloved sitcom went off the air, Asner played the title role in *Lou Grant*, editor of a fictional Los Angeles newspaper. In one of the boob tube's most infamous episodes of censorship,

L.A.-based film historian/critic Ed Rampell is the author of "Progressive Hollywood: A People's Film History of the United States" and co-founder of the James Agee Cinema Circle, an international left-leaning group of critics who annually award the Progies for Best Progressive Films and Filmmakers.

CBS canceled the hour-long drama in 1982, reportedly due to Asner's activism on Central America.

Asner's film career includes roles opposite Sidney Poitier in *They Call Me Mister Tibbs!*, with Paul Newman in *Fort Apache, the Bronx*, in Oliver Stone's *JFK*, and as Santa in *Elf*.

More recently, Asner has appeared on *ER* and HBO's *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. The winner of seven Emmys and five Golden Globes, Asner was inducted into the TV Academy Hall of Fame in 1996.

Eighty-year-old Asner is now going on the road nationwide in the play *FDR*, about President Roosevelt during the New Deal and World War II. (For details on the play's schedule, contact win@windwoodtheatricals.com.)

The role is very close to the heart of Asner, an activist actor often at the front lines, lending his celebrity to anti-war and other causes—sometimes at great cost to himself. Asner's outspoken commitment has also won him accolades, including the Anne Frank Human Rights Award, Eugene Debs Award, ACLU's Worker's Rights Committee Award, and the National Emergency Civil Liberties Award.

Shortly before Asner attended the Academy Awards ceremony, *The Progressive* interviewed him in the book-lined study of his modest house in a middle class residential neighborhood of L.A., as his Snowshoe Siamese cat Wheezy, whom Asner calls "my personal secretary," blithely walked across the star's desk.

Q • How did it feel to play the lead in *Up*, which was so well received?

Ed Asner: I'm tremendously delighted. I think *Up* is a marvelous film. It treats subjects that nonanimated pictures should be dealing with more. I hope realistic films will approach the subjects: old age, loneliness, discovering new life, new directions.

Q: How did you get picked for *Up*?

Asner: I was submitted by my voice agent sometime before they cast. During the course of their pondering who to put in the role of Carl, I was doing a one-man show in San Francisco by Emilie Beck called *Number of People* about a Holocaust survivor, and Pete Docter and Bob Peterson, the two main creators of *Up*, came to see me in it. It confirmed their opinion that they wanted me in the role.

Q: Are you worried about just doing voice parts and not getting acting roles in major [live action] films?

Asner: I love doing voice. I find it as wonderful a sat-

isfaction as acting on my feet. Since I love acting, if a voice comes along, as long as I can keep improvising and utilizing the tools that I have, I'll be happy.

Q: Can you discuss age discrimination in Tinseltown?

Asner: Hollywood has always been youth oriented; I guess they feel old people just don't go to movies. Until Hollywood relinquishes some of its fascination with the vacuity of young people and their hell-raising aspects, until they can see beyond that forest, we'll continue to be inundated with their latest peccadilloes.

Q: How did you get involved in progressive causes?

Asner: I'm intelligent! I began to become active with the ACLU, SANE, People for the American Way, the ADA, and certain wildlife organizations I've always been supportive of. I didn't become actively involved making speeches or anything like that until the '70s and '80s.

Q: How has somebody as outspoken and progressive as you been able to survive in Hollywood?

Asner: There are lots of people in Hollywood who give lip service to progressive causes. It is not a reactionary city or industry. When it comes to extending the lines and practicing freedom of speech, then it becomes difficult, as it did for me in terms of El Salvador.

Q: Has it become easier for progressives in Hollywood now?

Asner: [Sighs.] I don't think anything ever becomes easier for progressives. Far too much of our country is being misguided by rightwing radio, which dominates the airwaves. Far too many people are intrigued by the news space the tea baggers occupy. They talk about "socialism" while they're busy collecting their Social Security, unemployment, and Medicare checks, and busily decrying any other new innovation as being "socialistic."

Q: What do you think of socialism?

Asner: I think we need more of it.

Q: Should films take stands on the issues of the day?

Asner: Why tell a story if it doesn't have a message? Be it comedic or dramatic, there has to be a point of view.

Q: Why are you doing the *FDR* play now?

Asner: It's timely. First of all, I think Roosevelt is an American prophet who certainly is not lauded sufficiently in this country. I regard him as the second-greatest President in our history, after Lincoln. I've always wanted to do a one-man show, and this provided the meat. The times call for it. I thought it would be good for audiences to see what an effective, troubleshooting President accomplished in a similar situation.

Q: Do you think America needs programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Federal Theatre Project, which were part of FDR's New Deal?

Asner: Look at our unemployment figures. I'm not saying to tear an exact page off of history's books, but we need to create employment in our country. There is a constant erosion of the middle class. The farming out of manufacturing to all of the cheaper countries and then flooding our country with those products has disengaged many American workers. This country has done an insufficient job in providing them with new opportunities. Taking care of our people first, with works projects, should be the first order of the day.

Q: What personal recollections of Roosevelt do you have from your childhood?

Asner: I went to a high school that housed 2,000 kids. I went back a few years ago on a tour. It was built by WPA [Works Project Administration] workers. It's a gorgeous high school. This country was rebuilt by the WPA and similar projects. I need no further example than my high school to say, "Why aren't we doing that now?"

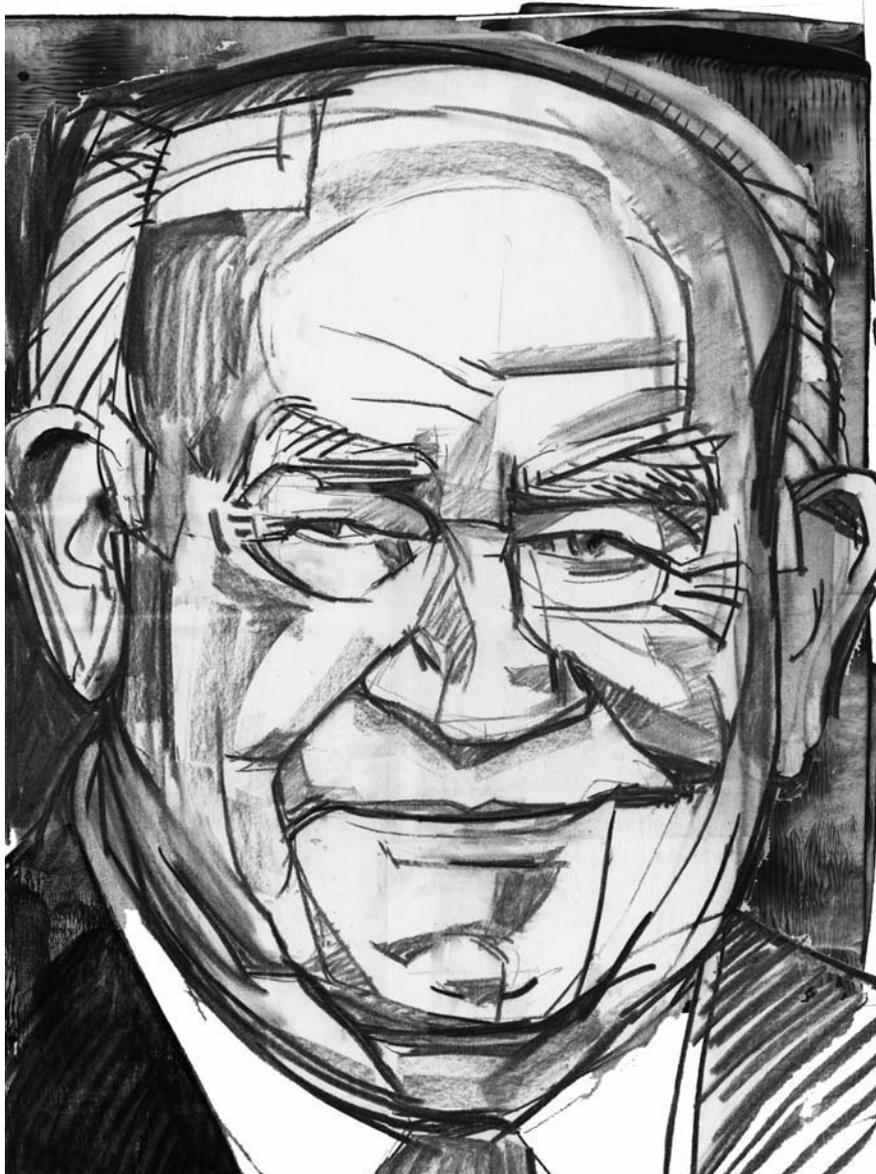
I drive the streets of L.A. I'm constantly hitting potholes; I see America's infrastructure deteriorating before my eyes. Why aren't we fixing that?

Q: After President Obama was elected, *Newsweek* depicted him as FDR. What's your take on Obama? Why hasn't he acted as forcibly as Roosevelt did?

Asner: Why don't you tell me that? I don't see it; I wait for it; I'd certainly welcome it.

Q: What's your reaction to Obama's willingness to reach across the aisle and his emphasis on bipartisanship?

Asner: Given the obstinacy of the Republicans, in terms of not offering anything in return, and saying, "no, no, no" to any Democratic proposals, the idea of



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compromise is meaningless.

Q: Do you think Obama is more captive of what FDR called the “economic royalists”?

Asner: I couldn't have put it better myself. Yes, there's far too much corporate control of America. When Reagan came in, he slashed corporate taxes. Now,

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everybody runs like a scared weakling at the thought of raising taxes. But this country thrived with high corporate taxes.

Q: One person who didn't run like “a scared weakling” was you, when you were president of the Screen Actors Guild in the 1980s. Tell us about

your clash with Reagan.

Asner: I became SAG president in 1981 and at the same time began speaking out against Reagan's support for the death squads in El Salvador and other Central American countries. I was involved in providing medical aid, which was taken as a communist-sympathizing act on my part. It created a shit storm, which eventuated in the cancellation of the *Lou Grant* show.

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Q: What would Lou Grant think of the decline of print newspapers today?

Asner: He'd be appalled and angry. He'd attempt to fight it with whatever weapons he had. He's not a revolutionary; he's a middle-of-the-road believer in freedom of the press and freedom of speech.

Q: Anything you'd like to add?

Asner: Let's keep *The Progressive* rolling along and increasing in might. And what a beautiful place this country could be if progressives dominated it. ♦

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