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Abstract

This article attempts a definition at what constitutes “character acting” in mainstream cinema in the United States and argues that throughout the peak of his film career—roughly, 1957 through 1976--Martin Balsam refined the definition of male character acting in American film, a parameter previously established by such skilled practitioners as Eugene Pallette and Claude Rains. Balsam did this through his ability to portray what can be termed “a man in a hat” portrayals: tartly humorous, reliable, and sometimes authoritative supporting characters, usually wearing a chapeau. This is clearly seen in such performances as the private investigator in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) and most interestingly, a partner in an unusual subway hijacking in Joseph Sargent’s *The Taking of Pelham One, Two, Three* (1974).

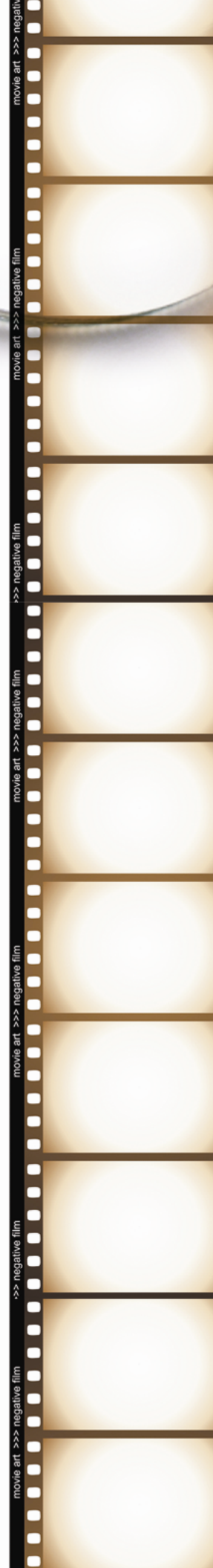
Keywords: Character acting, male, in film, United States; Martin Balsam; Academy Award for Best Performance by a Supporting Actor; Claude Rains; Alfred Hitchcock; 20th Century film acting.



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Man In A Hat: Martin Balsam¹ and the Refining Of Male Character Acting in American Films, 1957-1976

John Thomas McGuire

"I'll tell you; I still don't feel whatever change you're supposed to feel when your name goes up above the title. I think that's because this star thing has never been the first consideration with me. Never. The work has always come first. The supporting role is always potentially the most interesting in a film."

Remarks from Martin Balsam

"A famous gentleman walked up to the Tiki Room one day. I stammered, "Oh my gosh, you're, you're...."

"Martin Balsam. My name is Martin Balsam. Please remember my name after this." Ah, the anonymity of a character actor."²

It can be hard to define what a male film character actor does. The old definition of character acting—an actor who defines himself or herself through the use of distinctive eccentricities—seems more linked to its original theatrical origins. Perhaps a better, more filmic definition encompasses the idea that a character actor provides an interesting counterbalance to the film's leading actor or actress. The parameters of this proffered definition can be found in Martin Balsam's performance as *Washington Post* editor Howard Simons in Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976). The chief stars, Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman, play the protagonists, Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, who break one of the twentieth century's most important stories, the ensuing White House cover-up of the June 1972 Watergate break-in. Balsam

plays the somewhat clichéd part of a supervisor who decides to support Woodward’s and Bernstein’s efforts, but the actor gives his performance an interesting twist at times. For example, in a discussion with his fellow editors about whether Woodward and Bernstein should be retained on the story, Simons reveals, a bit embarrassedly, the “inspiration” for his calling Woodward’s secret source “Deep Throat”—the notorious 1972 pornographic film that became a big mainstream hit. Balsam’s calm demeanor and acerbic humor therefore provide interesting contrasts to Redford’s overt earnestness and Hoffman’s brittle jitteriness, proving a well-honed counterbalance that earned him a second nomination for Best Supporting Actor by the British Academy of Film and Television Arts.³

This article argues that throughout the peak of his film career—roughly, 1957 through 1976—Martin Balsam refined the definition of male character acting in American film, a parameter previously established by such skilled practitioners as Eugene Pallette and Claude Rains. Balsam did this through his ability to portray what can be termed “a man in a hat” portrayals: tartly humorous, reliable, and sometimes authoritative supporting characters, usually wearing a *chapeau*, that clearly, but not showily, complemented the lead actors’ performances. This is clearly seen in Balsam’s performances as the private investigator in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), as the White House chief of staff in John Frankenheimer’s *Seven Days in May* (1964), the pragmatic

brother in Fred Coe's *A Thousand Clowns* (1965), the part which earned Balsam his only Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor, and, most interestingly, a partner in an unusual subway hijacking in Joseph Sargent's *The Taking of Pelham One, Two, Three* (1974).

While I have offered a prefatory definition of character acting, a further discussion of the term seems necessary. As film scholar David Thomson points out, character actors play “roles of considerable importance in films, yet not the biggest,” so they do not receive close-ups, special lighting, or special attention from the filmmakers.⁴ Therefore, if we could compare a film to a painting, the lead actor occupies the center of the frame, holding the audience's attention in his or her natural grasp, while the character actors gather around the main character in either individual poses or in a group schema. The supporting actors thus complement, and do not overshadow, the main performances of the primary performer, except when the latter's efforts prove so feeble that their performances, in contrast, become the main point of the picture. The overall effect in such a situation may become dire, since the central vacuum forces the audience's attention to the major flaw in the film. Thus is the risk inherent in the usual American film system, which is more geared to stars instead of ensembles. On the other hand, the Screen Actors Guild's recent bestowal of annual ensemble awards for both films and television productions represent an acknowledgement, albeit not followed by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science (AMPAAS), that film acting is a natural collaboration.

Perhaps the best example of ensemble main character acting in the so-called classical period in American film can be found in Frank Capra's *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). Since its release, Capra's film has not only become an acknowledged classic, but now also stands as the first example of James Stewart's prominence as a leading actor and his first nominated role for an Academy Award for Best Leading Actor. The thirty-year-old Stewart did not, however, have any critical or commercial successes on his own before this film—in fact, his part in Capra's *You Can't Take It With You* (1938), the previous year's Academy Award winner for best film, only encompassed a small part in an impressive ensemble cast. Capra evidently decided to continue this process by surrounding the young actor with an impressive male supporting cast.

While *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* is mostly remembered today for Stewart's later scenes in the U.S. Senate chamber, conducting a filibuster against a corrupt bill, the first two-thirds of the film actually constitute a fast-paced comedy. Edward Arnold conveys both definite menace and witty sarcasm as the home state's machine boss, especially when snarling the supposedly laudatory description of Claude Rains's Senatorial solon, "*The Silver Knight*." Eugene Pallette also elicits some substantial laughs as the bumbling, yet endearing henchman put in charge of controlling the new, naïve Senator. Thomas Mitchell also shows up as the newspaperman who initially dismisses Stewart as an object of pity, only to later rally support to the filibustering

Senator. The year 1939 represented a definite peak in Mitchell's career; not only did he appear in this film and Victor Fleming's *Gone With the Wind* as Scarlett's tempestuous, ill-fated father, but his supporting part in John Ford's *Stagecoach* garnered him the 1940 Best Supporting Actor Oscar over his *Smith* co-star, Claude Rains.⁵

Character actors had existed in films since their first, flickering origins in the 1890s, but the introduction of sound naturally brought them into further prominence, particularly with the need for spoken dialogue. Perhaps Palette became the most important early establisher of the male character actor image in American film. Appearing in 240 film productions during his nearly forty-year career, the actor seemed as ubiquitous during the 1930s as Franklin D. Roosevelt in the newsreels accompanying his films. Palette actually began acting in silent films (he can briefly be seen as a lover in the St. Bartholomew's Day sequence in D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916)), but he came into his own in sound films—co-starring, for example, in the first feature-length dialogue film in the United States, Bryan Foy's *Lights of New York* (1928). Over the next eleven years he established himself as an essential character actor in such classic films as Gregory La Cava's *My Man Godfrey* (1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Palette's main distinguishing features centered on his exceptionally growly voice and his canny ability to play grouchy but essentially good-hearted sidekicks.⁶

Even with this rising importance, however, the AMPAAS did not consider male supporting actors to be worthy of its awards for the first ten years of existence. The ridiculousness of this oversight became apparent by 1936, when Franchot Tone, clearly a supporting player, nonetheless joined the major stars of Frank Lloyd's *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), Charles Laughton and Clark Gable, on the nomination list for Best Actor. Not surprisingly, all three lost to Victor McLaglen for his performance in John Ford's *The Informer* (1935). Moreover, the disparity continued into the next year, even with the final establishment of an Academy Award for Outstanding Performance By A Supporting Actor. Although his performance as a priest in W.S. Van Dyke's *San Francisco* (1936) supplemented stars Clark Gable and Jeannette MacDonald, Spencer Tracy still received his first nomination for Best Actor.⁷

The definition of male character acting in the "golden age" of Hollywood received further elucidation by arguably the greatest practitioner of that art, Claude Rains. A classically trained stage actor, Rains first expressed his formidable filmic presence as the title character in James Whale's *The Invisible Man* (1933). By the beginning of his Warner Brothers (WB) days in 1935, Rains began asserting himself in supporting parts rather than lead roles. Until his WB contract expired in 1950, the actor created an indelible series of performances in a substantial number of the studio's most distinguished films, as well as in "loan-outs" to other studios: the fey King John

in Michael Curtiz's and William Keighley's *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938); the budding and inwardly corrupt presidential prospect in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*; the cynical French police captain who surprises Humphrey Bogart's Rick Blaine in Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942); and the tragically torn husband of Ingrid Bergman in Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (1946). Perhaps the best indication of Rains's wide range comes in Vincent Sherman's *Mr. Skeffington* (1944). The film becomes a long, turgid recounting of a rather spoiled woman's life, played to mixed effect by Davis, too old for the part at age 36. Rains therefore becomes the film's true emotional center through his portrayal of the title character, a Jewish financier only married by Davis because of her need to save her brother from financial ruin. The key scene occurs between Mr. Skeffington and his daughter, particularly when Rains informs his child that he must leave for Europe without revealing her mother's infidelity. The British actor, whose vanity made him hide his "common" Welsh origins, acted memorably until his death in 1967, as exemplified by his exquisite playing of the Arab Bureau head in David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).

When one considers that Rains's outstanding performances helped establish a clear model for male character acting in American film by the 1950s, it becomes astonishing to find that he never received an Academy Award, despite four nominations. This becomes even more incomprehensible when one considers that Walter Brennan won three Academy Awards for Best Supporting Actor in 1937, 1939, and 1941. Brennan's ability to carve out a lovable curmudgeon

(even *sans* teeth) allowed him to encompass a film and television career that lasted well into the 1960s. But his supporting roles, while memorable at times, do not retrospectively establish any lasting model for male character acting. Ironically, Rains's failure is echoed by that of his fellow co-holder of the record for Academy Award nominations: Arthur Kennedy, who also received an award despite four nominations from 1950 through 1959.⁸

Born in New York City in 1919, Martin Balsam did not appear in a film until he reached his thirty-fifth year, but his initial acting years belied such apparent inexperience. After first participating in the repertoire company at DeWitt Clinton High School, the Bronx native debuted on an off-stage Broadway production, "Pot Boiler," in 1935. Within the next fifteen years Balsam not only graduated from the Actors' Studio, but also began acting in Broadway productions and on the nascent television screen, where he played a Chinese peasant for \$13 on a 1948 *Captain Video* production.⁹ One clearly sees his quick ability to assert character authority in a kinescoped episode of the Columbia Broadcasting System television series *Suspense*. In "The Third One" installment, originally aired in November 1949, Balsam plays a New York City police officer who investigates the biting of three children by a rabid dog. In the midst of some overemphatic acting, Balsam easily establishes his presence as an officer of the law not only through the use of his deep

voice, but also through a combination of humor and attentiveness to the increasingly concerned crowd that surrounds the stricken children.¹⁰

Interestingly, Balsam made his first mark in two films considered among the ten best pictures made, or at least released, by the United States' mainstream studio system in the 1950s. In Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954), he appears briefly as one of the legislative investigators (complete with fedora, trench coat and pipe) trying to get Marlon Brando's Terry Malloy to testify against the corrupt waterfront boss played by Lee J. Cobb. In this brief appearance Balsam establishes his trademarks: the rumbling voice, the sometimes sarcastic, urbanized manner, and the unruffled demeanor. In Sidney Lumet's *Twelve Angry Men* (1957), Balsam further came to prominence as a character actor, particularly as the film received a nomination for Best Film (although it performed poorly at the box office). The drama involves the deliberations of twelve New York City male jurors in a first-degree murder trial which carries the death penalty. The defendant is an eighteen-year-old Puerto Rican from the Upper East Side slums, and he is accused of stabbing his father to death after a heated argument in their apartment. Juror No. 8, played by Henry Fonda, becomes the only juror not to initially vote "Guilty." He insists that the case needs more examination before a final verdict can be rendered. The film is also interesting because it features an array of actors who would establish themselves as consummate character players over the next 25 years: not only such film stalwarts as Jack Warden, Ed Begley (who won a Best

Supporting Actor Academy Award three years before Balsam for his performance in Richard Brooks's *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1962)), and Ed Binns, but eventual television stars such as E.G. Marshall (*The Defenders*) and Jack Klugman (*The Odd Couple*).¹¹

In the midst of this overall acting excellence, however, Balsam's performance is a bit mixed. While he handles his big moment well (a discussion with Fonda about being a high school teacher and assistant coach of his school's football team), his voice sometimes becomes too high-pitched, perhaps a natural choice given the foreman's ineffectual behavior when confronting such forceful jurors such as Lee J. Cobb's working-class bully or E.G. Marshall's waspish, analytical, colleague. Perhaps the only solid effect of Balsam's performance can also be attributed to the relatively minor screen time given his character by Reginald Rose's script.

The film that truly established Balsam's most lasting persona as "a man in a hat" was *Psycho*, in which he played the private investigator, Milton Arbogast. This film now constitutes in most critical opinion the long-time British director's second-best, as well as most notorious, film in his extensive *oeuvre*. *Psycho*, for example, stands in the top 20 films on both the 1998 and 2007 American Film Institute's list of the 100 greatest American films made in the twentieth century. One may disagree with that critical assessment, but one cannot deny the centrality of

Balsam's performance to the overall theme of most of the characters' "normality" vs. the always interesting "abnormality" of Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins.)¹²

Hired to find out the whereabouts of Janet Leigh's character, Marion Crane, who absconds with \$40,000 belonging to one of her employer's clients, we initially see Balsam's character as a face crowned by a black fedora peering suspiciously through the glass plate windows of the hardware store of Crane's boyfriend, Sam Loomis. It is apparently Saturday afternoon, about a week after Marion's mysterious disappearance. Loomis, unaware of her vanishing, has just finished a letter asking her to move from Phoenix, Arizona, when Marion's sister, Lila comes into the store. They do not see Arbogast until the private investigator comes in and begins an intense interrogation of Loomis, sarcastically addressing the man as "friend" and evidently suspecting that he has played some part in the suspicious events. Arbogast interestingly refrains from doing the same to Lila, who later reveals to Sam that the detective liked her. He abruptly ends the interrogations by stating that he is going to search hotels and motels in the local area to see if Crane stayed, or is staying, in any of them.

After a montage sequence representing his two days of investigation, we see Arbogast driving into the Bates Motel, where Norman is in the midst of changing the linen. The viewer sees a sharp contrast between Balsam's character, attired in typical 1950s conservative clothing, with Bates's somewhat collegiate appearance—a black sweater and chino pants. The young motel

owner also acts as an affable, even friendly, person towards the private detective, particularly in the litany he seems to use with every guest--how empty the motel is (“twelve rooms, twelve vacancies”) and how the new highway apparently diverted too many motorists from the old one near the motel. But his quirky abnormality eventually surfaces, particularly through Bates’s increasing stutters and facial twitches. Taking advantage of this rising nervousness, Arbogast quietly, yet firmly, elicits from the motel owner the confession that someone did stay at the motel in the past two weeks. The detective further confirms his suspicion by identifying Marion’s handwriting in the motel ledger by comparing it to her real signature. Arbogast also keeps Bates off balance through the use of unexpected questions and conclusions (“Did you spend the night with her?” “Something’s missing.”). Throughout this approximately five-minute sequence our sympathy gradually shifts from Bates to Arbogast, particularly as we realize the detective’s considerable skills at prying information from reluctant witnesses. Finally, when Bates mentions that Crane met his invalid mother, Arbogast immediately asks to see her. After Bates refuses, Arbogast leaves, but we sense that he will not give up, particularly as his professional curiosity and suspicion have been stimulated by Bates’s quirky behavior.

That suspicion, and the continuing revelation of the detective underlying good character, is subsequently revealed in the telephone conversation he has with Lila, now waiting at Sam’s

house. Arbogast reports that he has confirmed Marion's apparent one-night stay at the Bates Motel, and tells Lila that he will come to Sam's house in about an hour after returning to the motel for further investigation. Then, finally, he drops his hard-nosed mask and tells Lila that he does not suspect Sam anymore of conspiring with Marion about the stolen money. The next scene finds Arbogast returning to the motel, where he immediately notes the spooky room of stuffed birds (used so memorably in the previous encounter between Bates and Crane) and then searches an open safe, evidently hoping to find evidence of the stolen money. Then he walks up the hill and enters the house, slowly climbing up the central stairs to the landing (with his hat now off). Bates's mother apparently comes out of her bedroom and surprises the private investigator with a sudden slash of a knife against his face. Arbogast tumbles down the stairs and is stabbed to death by the vengeful matriarch.

We feel a mixture of emotions when contemplating Arbogast's demise. On one hand, we feel sorrow because of his considerable competence and his dogged search for Marion Crane. But we also feel a certain relish at the irony that Arbogast thought that he could easily outwit such an evidently immature, neurotic man. The apparently seasoned private investigator never fully sensed the depravity lurking behind that twitchy persona. Arbogast's influence, however, does not end there. Lila, convinced of Arbogast's integrity, continues to pursue his trail, finally solving the case

by going to the Bates Motel with Sam. Thus the man in a hat's seemingly fruitless efforts did not end in vain.¹³

Nearly four years later Balsam continued to attract critical attention through his performance in *Seven Days in May*. In the film, he enacts Paul Girard, the chief of staff to the President, Jordan Lyman. In Rod Serling's script, which hews to the 1962 bestselling novel, Lyman faces three formidable obstacles: his plummeting popularity in the Gallup poll, the possible violation by the Soviet Union of a new treaty eliminating the nuclear stockpiles of both Cold War protagonists, and, most important, a burgeoning conspiracy by his chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General James Scott, to seize the government during a weekend defense system drill.¹⁴

Like most of Balsam's films of his important period, *Seven Days in May* encompasses an impressive ensemble cast: Kirk Douglas, John Houseman, Burt Lancaster, Frederic March, and Edmond O'Brien. Unlike the book, however, which gave us an inkling of Girard's past connections with Lyman (for example, that he acted as the President's campaign manager), the film only gives us a few scenes for the character. This lack of film time can be partially attributed to the necessary trimming of novelistic exposition, partially due to the fact that Girard perishes halfway through the film, and mostly due to the other supporting players receive more screen time. (In fact, O'Brien received his second Academy Award nomination for Best Supporting Actor for his performance

as Lyman's alcoholic Southerner friend.) But Balsam still makes the most of his brief running time. In his first scene with Douglas, who plays the Marine colonel who reveals the military conspiracy, Girard makes it clear that he is taking a considerable risk allowing the Marine to see the President. The best scene for Balsam, however, comes when he must fence with a Navy fleet commander so as to obtain critical information corroborating the conspiracy. Played by Houseman, then only known as a respected film producer, the two actors played out the coy confrontation with evident relish. And, in a fitting denouement, the naval commander's confession, later recovered from an airplane crash in Girard's battered cigarette case, proves a significant factor in preventing Scott's plot.

Throughout 1964 Balsam continued to further his profile, capped by his receiving a National Board of Review Best Supporting Actor citation for his work in Edward Dmytryk's *The Carpetbaggers* (1964), where he played the assistant to a young, dynamic multi-millionaire loosely modeled on the legendary, if still extant at the time, Howard Hughes. Then in 1965 came the release of the film adaptation of Howard Gardner's 1962 Tony-Award winning play, *A Thousand Clowns*. Not only did the film receive an Academy Award nomination for best film in a process that usually awarded such laurels to contemporary blockbusters as Robert Wise's *The Sound of Music* and David Lean's *Doctor Zhivago*, but Balsam won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor

over a rather tough field, including Tom Courtenay from *Zhivago* and Michael Dunn from Stanley Kramer's *Ship of Fools*.¹⁵

In this film Balsam probably plays the best exemplification of the reasonable middle-class man in a hat who provides ballast for the major characters. When one first considers *A Thousand Clowns*, however, his supporting work initially seems slight. The film focuses on Murray Burns, played by the consummate actor Jason Robards, Jr, then still in his leading man days. Murray is an obviously intelligent, articulate man who found himself forced to write scripts for a local children's television show entitled *Chuckles Chipmunk*. Although *Chuckles*, played knowingly by Gene Saks, liked Murray's work, Burns suddenly quit one day when he realized, as he later admits to his brother, Arnold, that he went to work not even remembering what day it was. Murray thereafter spends five months on unemployment compensation, roaming his native New York City on daily trips with his nephew, Nicholas, who lives with Murray because his mother abandoned him six years earlier to pursue a ne'er do well life.

One day, after another aimless jaunt, Murray and Nicholas come home to encounter a dual team of investigators from the New York City Child Board of Health. The investigators claim that authorities at Nicholas's school contacted their agency after discovering that he lived with his unemployed uncle. While Murray tries to fend off their inquiries, it eventually becomes clear that

unless he finds a job before a hearing scheduled in three days, he will lose guardianship over Nicholas. Complicating the situation is the sudden decision of one of the investigators, Sondra, to leave her job and live with Murray and Nicholas.

About halfway through the film's 118 minutes, Murray goes to see Arnold, played by Balsam, in his mid-town Manhattan office. Before this scene Arnie, as he is also known, has only been briefly seen dropping off fruit at Murray's apartment every day before work. Murray's brother is an obviously very successful man as an agent at the William Morris Company. He wears expensive suits and natty hats, and as Murray sarcastically remarks, Arnie has a nice office on the twenty-second floor. While Murray and Arnie get along, as evidenced by their laughing over Murray's bringing a pineapple, an obviously concerned Arnie arranges for his brother to go on two hastily convened job interviews. Neither interview works, however, and when Arnie subsequently desperately contacts Leo, a disgusted Murray walks out.

Murray returns to his apartment, only to see Sondra leave after hearing the bad news. He eventually arranges to meet Arnie later that evening, apparently at a local diner or bar. Arnie comes in to find his brother slumped over a counter, playing an old recording of "The Stars and Stripes Forever," a constant part of the film score. Balsam stops the recording, demanding to know why Murray suddenly walked out of the office. When Murray reveals his hatred of Leo, Arnie reminds him of the necessity of finding a job before he loses custody of Nicholas. Murray then

goes on a soliloquy, relating how his *ennui* during commuting led to quitting his job. He also complains how his brother used to be a fun-loving young man; now, Murray claims, Arnie just seems like all the other harried Manhattan office workers, grinding away at existence as if it were a “dental appointment.”

When Murray suddenly gets up to leave, Arnie suddenly yells at him. Calling his brother someone who wants to be an archetypal hero, like a someone saving a drowning person, Arnie declares the obvious: that such opportunities do not readily exist in mid-town Manhattan. He adds that he needs to survive in the “available world,” particularly with a wife and three children. Essential to such survival, Arnie concludes, is a “talent for surrender,” the ability to recognize that “business is business.” “So I lie a little,” he declares, a bit sadly, “peddle a little, watch the rules, and talk the talk.”

In this important scene, one realizes the very essence of Balsam’s character acting, his ability to delineate the archetypal man in a hat: a person who needs to exist in the midst of daily work, particularly that of white-collar business, who must surrender to conventionality and uphold the daily rules of existence in order to survive. Conforming to, or to paraphrase what Arnie says, “surrendering” to such conventionality does not mean that one also surrenders one’s intelligence or self-awareness. Arnie realizes that his conformity has led to his becoming deader inside,

perhaps forgetting, as Murray earlier puts it, the reasons why human beings are not like chairs. But he reminds Murray that if one wants to meet responsibilities in the real, if substantially flawed, world, one must yield to the sometimes soul-deadening demands of responsibility.

Murray eventually acts on the wisdom of Arnie's observations the next day. Leo comes to visit him in his apartment, but his obnoxiousness and neediness finally even irritates the usually affable Nicholas, who destroys a life-size cardboard cutout of the chipmunk character. When Leo threatens to leave, however, Murray mollifies him and agrees to return to the show the next day, despite Nicholas's protests. With Sondra returning to the apartment, and Nicholas saved from being put in a foster home, the film ends the next morning with Murray finally bedecked in a business suit, scrambling to work from his Seventh Avenue apartment like the other millions of commuters either threading their way through the city or coming in from the suburban environs.

Two interesting observations can be made of Balsam's work in this film. First, his portrayal of Arnold Burns also echoes the situation of a sadder, more tragic character that he later enacted: Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of A Salesman*. Both are common men who survive by means of denial, but the essential difference is that Burns recognizes his delusions, while Loman eventually resolves his by self-annihilation. Second, his acting is a typical example of Balsam's craftsmanship as a character actor. He does not light up the screen, so to speak, with melodramatic monologues or sudden, dramatic bursts of action. One could say that the Academy

Award for Best Supporting Actor sometimes became more of a sinecure for previous stars to regain some of their former glory than for the character actors that the award was originally intended for. One typical example comes in Frank Zimmermann's *From Here to Eternity* (1953). Frank Sinatra co-starred as Private Angelo Maggio at a rather low point in his career, with neither a record contract nor a viable film career in existence. One does not want to unduly detract from Sinatra's performance; at times he does suggest in fine form the Italianate temper lurking beneath Maggio's seemingly nonchalant exterior, a simmering volcano that eventually seals his doom. One should also note the heartrending effect of his final exchange with fellow soldier Prewitt, played by Montgomery Clift. But in the early scenes Sinatra plays too much to the putative audiences in a sort of "ain't I sweet?" manner. Balsam avoids such sentimentality, such obvious play-acting, in the interests of remaining true to his task of complementing, not upstaging, the lead actors. Balsam confirmed this tendency in an interview given to *The Los Angeles Times* shortly after receiving the Academy Award. "I suppose an actor gets the supporting award and he wants to say, 'Right, this is it. This sets the seal on my career. I've arrived.'," he told the newspaper. "But I've got to say, 'Hold on, fella, you've been around too long. Let's not get carried away.'" Thus Balsam apparently did not let his newfound success interfere with his established credibility as a character actor.¹⁶

By the late 1960s, Balsam began diversifying his character parts in major films, as seen in three 1970 releases. In Mike Nichols's *Catch-22*, Balsam assayed the part of Colonel Cathcart, the archetypal military commander who caresses the egos of his superiors but provides little surcease for the increasingly harried officers and enlisted men who fly the B-25 missions, particularly Alan Arkin's Yossarian. In Arthur Penn's *Little Big Man*, a revisionist retelling of the Wild West saga by an allegedly 120-year-old character played by Dustin Hoffman, Balsam plays Mr. Merriweather, a disreputable, yet oddly likeable, con man who usually tries to sell unsuspecting frontiers people dubious medicines. Eliciting the support of Hoffman's character as a skill, Merriweather survives the loss of one arm and the indignity of being tarred and feathered, philosophically stating that one must live to the best of one's ability in an indifferent universe. Finally, Balsam's performance as the ill-fated naval commander of Pearl Harbor, Admiral Husband Kimmel, enlivens Richard Fleischer's *Tora! Tora! Tora!*, still the best exploration of the events leading up to, and including, the 1941 Japanese attack, Michael Bay's explosive *Pearl Harbor* (2001) notwithstanding.¹⁷

Balsam, however, did not totally shy away from his "man in a hat" performances, as can be seen in his twisty portrayal in *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*. Released exactly forty years ago, the film is still a witty, suspenseful examination of nefarious activity in the midst of a declining New York City. The financial and artistic success of William Freidkin's *The French*

Connection (1971) thereafter spurred film studios to undertake similar “gritty” examinations, in the parlance of the times, of the United States’ archetypal metropolis. These films ranged from Michael Winner’s *Death Wish* (1974), where a grief-stricken Charles Bronson wreaks indiscriminate vengeance on street criminals after the murder of his wife and rape of his daughter, to Sidney Lumet’s *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), based on an actual 1972 Brooklyn bank robbery, where the main character, played by Al Pacino, triumphantly, if temporarily, holds hostages in a bank. The darkest example, of course, became Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), where Travis Bickle, enacted by Robert DeNiro, prowls the nighttime streets of Manhattan in his taxicab.

While not as dark as these other contemporary films, *Pelham* survives as an enjoyable viewing due to the combination of interesting performances by a top-notch cast (Walter Matthau, Balsam, and Robert Shaw) and the witty, knowing script by Peter Stone, best known for writing Stanley Donen’s *Charade* (1963). The film opens up with Balsam’s character, known as “Mr. Green” throughout most of the two-hour running time, coming out of the 59th Street Station wearing an overcoat, a hat, and a fake mustache. He eventually boards the 1:23 p.m. train which originated from Pelham Bay, Brooklyn (an actual route, thus giving the film its name), sneezing, a personal action that gains later significance. Then “Mr. Gray,” “Mr. Brown,” and finally, the ringleader, “Mr. Blue,” played by Shaw, board. Interspersed with these scenes is the other story

in the film: the daily exodus of New York Transit Inspector Zachary Garber, played by Matthau.¹⁸ Garber naturally possesses some quirks—for example, he favors yellow ties with plaid shirts—but he establishes himself as a likable character, shepherding through transit headquarters a seemingly non-English speaking delegation of Japanese transit executives. We also see other transit officials, including the unmistakably urban head of the Grand Central transit headquarters.

Eventually the four criminal confederates take over the 123 Pelham train, brandishing pistols and shotguns, except for Mr. Green. The criminals force the motorman to stop the train in one of the subway tunnels. Mr. Blue then contacts the transit authorities and informs Garber, the ranking officer at headquarters, that \$1 million in unmarked bills must be delivered to the stopped train within 45 minutes, or a passenger will die every minute afterwards. To show their determination, the confederates kill the aforementioned noisy transit head, who comes down the tracks demanding to know why the train hopelessly ensnared the entire subway system, and a new conductor.

During the tense waiting period, during which the mayor and his associates cynically debate over the feasibility of paying the demanded ransom, we discover certain things about the four criminals. Mr. Blue is a former British army officer and mercenary with a cool intelligence and an unwavering determination. Mr. Brown is rather nondescript but emerges as a staunchly loyal figure. Mr. Gray is a flamboyant psychopath, whose eagerness to kill made him an outcast

even in the Mafia. Mr. Green emerges as perhaps the most understandable character. Balsam's character is a former subway motorman who, we later learn, lost his job for surreptitiously transporting drugs. He becomes concerned about Mr. Gray's itchy trigger finger and seems more motivated out of a sense of vengeance on his former employer than for any mercenary or psychopathic reasons.

The ransom is eventually paid, and Mr. Blue demands that the subway tracks be placed on a permanent green light so that the train can proceed uninterrupted down to the South Side of Manhattan. Gerber and the other police authorities believe that the confederates mean to get away after the train ends up near Wall Street, but Mr. Blue's plan is more deadly: after the confederates leave the train at a side station, the subway cars will continue to proceed unimpeded at full speed until finally crashing at the line's end. The plan is not only eventually foiled by the automatic system underlying the subway lines, but also by a plainclothesman who leaves the train as the four criminals try to escape. After Mr. Blue finally loses patience and kills Mr. Gray for refusing to relinquish his weapon before leaving the station, the remaining three confederates engage in a gunfight with the ironically counterculture-clad police officer. As Mr. Brown dies in the fusillade, and Mr. Blue remains trapped, Mr. Green scuttles away with the ransom. When Gerber comes on

the scene, Mr. Blue calmly confirms that New York no longer uses the death penalty, then electrocutes himself on a third rail.

The end of the film is a classic twisted denouement. We see Green back at his apartment, throwing himself upon the bundles of money strewn on his bed. But Gerber is not far behind. He and his compatriots investigate all motormen discharged within the last five years, and therefore come to Mr. Green's apartment. Green, realizing that the New York police are at his door, quickly shovels the stolen money into his kitchen stove. He deftly parries Garber's questions, while also preventing one of the other detective's attempts at lighting a cigarette at the stove. But as Gerber and his assistant leave, Green sneezes. Gerber says, "*Gesundheit*," as he did several times during the hijacking when Green expectorated over the radio as he talked to Mr. Blue. The frame freezes on Gerber's triumphant visage as he reopens the door. Thus Balsam's "man in a hat" loses everything in the matter of a few seconds.

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* constituted the last manifestation of Martin Balsam's "man in a hat" persona. That film garnered him his first BAFTA nomination, but his 1966 Academy Award win represented his only nomination from the AMPAAS. Moreover, unlike Matthau, Balsam never moved to leading actor parts, although that apparently never concerned the actor. He did try a leading part in television for one year as Archie Bunker's

liberal saloon co-owner in the retooled *All in the Family* show, *Archie Bunker's Place*, but never undertook such parts after that turn, increasingly accepting parts in European films, mainly to stay near his Italian residence.¹⁹

As this article has argued, Martin Balsam helped refine the definition of character acting in American films from 1957 through 1976 through his multi-layered characterizations of “man in a hat” roles in films such as *Psycho*, *Seven Days in May*, and *The Taking of Pelham One Two and Three*. The exemplification of this characterization came in Balsam’s Academy-Award winning portrayal of Arnold Burns in *A Thousand Clowns*. Balsam’s excellent portrayals therefore an invaluable addition to the mosaic of character acting in American film during the twentieth century.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ It is amazing to witness the lack of proper scholarship on actors like Martin Balsam. Scholarly journals barely mention Balsam (see Williams (1985), McConachie (2000), Hand (2017)). *CINEJ* welcomes this amazing contribution to the field. [editor's note].
- ² The quotations from Balsam come from Myrna Oliver, "Martin Balsam: Veteran Character Actor," *Los Angeles Times* 14 February 1996, Accessed on March 27, 2019, http://articles.latimes.com/1996-02-14/news/mn-35894_1_martin-balsam. Janie Wright, *Walking in the Wonder: A Memoir of Gratitude for A Lifetime of Miracles* (Bloomington, Ind: Author Home 2011), 43.
- ³ *All the President's Men*, DVD, directed by Alan J. Pakula (1976; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006).
- ⁴ David Thomson, "The Lives of Supporting Players," in Pamela Robertson Wojcik, ed., *Movie Acting: The Film Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 208-209. This definition may not be totally applicable today, given the proclivity of major stars to take supporting parts in films that arguably give them easier opportunities to garner a Supporting Actor or Actress Academy Award, such as Morgan Freeman in *Million Dollar Baby*, DVD, directed by Clint Eastwood (2004; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2005).
- ⁵ Since this is an article about the development of male character acting, I can only laud in passing the considerable contribution of Jean Arthur, who provides essential support as the chief aide of the former Senator that Jefferson Smith replaces in office, and who eventually becomes Stewart's lover and chief supporter. *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, DVD, directed by Frank Capra (1939; Hollywood, CA: Sony Home Entertainment, 2008).
- ⁶ Despite Pallette's ubiquitousness before World War II, his career, paradoxically, has yielded no considerable study of either his life or film career.
- ⁷ *San Francisco*, DVD, directed by W.S. Van Dyke (1936; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006). Ironically, Tracy went on to the next two consecutive Academy Awards for Best Actor.
- ⁸ Perhaps the best source for Rains's life and film career is the recent biography, David J. Skal and Jessica Rains, *An Actor's Voice: Claude Rains* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2008). Walter Brennan's interesting career, which lasted some fifty years, is chronicled best in Jim Collins, "Faces Without Names," in Gary A. Yoggy, ed., *Back in the Saddle: Essays on Western Film and Television Actors* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998), 147-149. Arthur Kennedy's life and acting has also received an excellent consideration in Meredith Macksoud, Craig R. Smith, and Jackie Lohrke, *Arthur Kennedy: Man of Characters* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2003). Kennedy received a fifth nomination, this time for Best Actor, in 1952 for his part as a blinded World War II veteran in Mark Robson's *Brave Victory* (1951), but he lost to Humphrey Bogart.
- ⁹ An essential source for Balsam's overall career is Lawrence Van Gilder, "Martin Balsam Is Dead at 76; Ubiquitous Character Actor," *New York Times* (14 February 1996), Accessed March 27, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/14/nyregion/martin-balsam-is-dead-at-76-ubiquitous-character-actor.html>. For an excellent general description of Martin Balsam's early acting career, including a full list of major stage and television

appearances, see “Balsam, Martin” entry in Barry Monash, *Screen World Presents The Encyclopedia of Hollywood Film Actors From the Silent Era to 1965* (New York: Applause Theatre and Cinema Books, 2003), 39.

¹⁰ “The Third One,” *Suspense* (22 November 1949, Season 2, Episode 12), *YouTube*, Accessed April 11, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BBvFsF7rtWs>. Balsam does almost fluff one line when he speaks to the police lieutenant, although that miscue is certainly understandable in the midst of a live television performance.

¹¹ *On the Waterfront*, DVD, directed by Elia Kazan (1954; Hollywood, CA: Sony International Home Entertainment, 2001). *12 Angry Men*, DVD, directed by Sidney Lumet (1957; Burbank, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2001).

¹² *Psycho*, DVD, directed by Alfred J. Hitchcock (1960; Hollywood, CA: Universal Home Video, 2012). *Psycho* comes just below *Vertigo* in the 1998 and 2007 AFI lists, No. 18 on the first, then No. 14 on the second. To see the two lists, look at “AFI 100 Years . . . 100 Movies,” *American Film Institute*, Accessed March 28, 2014, <http://www.afi.com/100years/movies.aspx>.

¹³ Balsam reiterates his investigatory milieu, albeit in a more authoritarian way, in J. Lee Thompson’s *Cape Fear* (1962). While the film possesses some similarities to its sensationalistic predecessor in its tense atmosphere and especially the score by Bernard Herrmann, which partially echoes his more famous work in Hitchcock’s film, *Cape Fear* also deviates from the new formula established by *Psycho*. The tension never approaches the high intensities of the shower scene, for example, although it doubtlessly contains many scenes of suspense, particularly through the low-key, yet effective characterization of the psychopath, Max Cady, played by Robert Mitchum. Balsam’s part is small, but important. He is the authority figure that must reluctantly tell the main protagonist, a local attorney played by Girard Peck, that Cady’s increasingly threatening actions nonetheless do not constitute criminal offenses, and thus the law is helpless to prevent Cady’s menace towards the attorney and his family. Thus, in an indirect way, Balsam echoes the impotence of the professional investigator in *Psycho* –the logical processes of “normality” can do nothing against the threats of psychosis and violence.

¹⁴ *Seven Days in May*, DVD, directed by John Frankenheimer (1964; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2000).

¹⁵ *A Thousand Clowns*, DVD, directed by Fred Coe (1965; Hollywood, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2011). Given its status as a Best Picture nominee, it is a shame that the picture’s DVD only encompasses a bare-bones treatment, with no special features besides the original trailer and generic cast and crew information.

¹⁶ The interesting story behind Balsam’s version of Arthur Miller’s play can be found in Andrew Davis, *America’s Longest Run: A History of the Walnut Street Theater* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010). *From Here to Eternity*, DVD, directed by Fred Zinnemann (1953; Hollywood, CA: Columbia Tristar Home Entertainment, 2001). Quotations from Oliver, “Martin Balsam: Veteran Character Actor.”

¹⁷ Interestingly, Merriweather’s viewpoint echoes that of Donald Draper, the main character of American Movie Classics’s *Mad Men*, on which both Martin Balsam’s daughter and her husband, John Slattery, appeared on from 2007 onwards.

¹⁸ Interestingly, Balsam announced, and presented to, Matthau, his 1967 Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor for Billy Wilder’s *The Fortune Cookie* (1966). *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*, DVD, directed by John Sargent (1974; Hollywood, CA: MGM Home Entertainment, 2000).

¹⁹ See “Martin Balsam Is Dead At Age 76.”