



Arthur Penn

Director, Producer

Birth September 27, 1922 (Philadelphia, Pa)

Genres Drama, Western, Comedy Drama, Film, TV and Radio, History

Once the vanguard of 1960s-1970s Hollywood New Wave, director Arthur Penn saw his cinematic fortunes decline with the mid-'70s rise of more straightforward blockbuster entertainment. Even as he struggled through the '80s and '90s, however, Penn's legacy was assured by such films as *Little Big Man* (1970), *Night Moves* (1975), and the pivotal masterwork *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967).

Born in Philadelphia, Penn was trained to follow in his father's footsteps as a watchmaker, but by high school, he knew he preferred theater. While stationed at Fort Jackson, SC, during World War II, Penn formed a small drama circle with his fellow infantrymen, and continued his education as an actor at school in North Carolina and Italy after the war. Though Penn acted in Joshua Logan's theater company and studied with Michael Chekhov at the Actors Studio's Los Angeles branch, he opted for a career behind the scenes when he got a job at NBC TV in 1951. By 1953, Penn was writing and directing live TV productions for the *Philco Playhouse* and *Playhouse 90*. Earning a shot at feature films, Penn combined the Method acting concentration on character psychology with the story of legendary Western outlaw Billy the Kid in *The Left-Handed Gun* (1958). Starring Paul Newman as Billy and shot in crisp black-and-white, *The Left-Handed Gun* emphasized '50s rebel neuroses over pastoral spectacle, becoming more of a character study of youthful revolt spiked with dramatic violence than a typical good vs. bad oater. Though European audiences loved it, Americans were unimpressed. Having directed the Broadway success *Two for the Seesaw* that same year, Penn stuck with theater and quickly established a sterling reputation with consecutive Broadway hits: *The Miracle Worker*, *Toys in the Attic*, and *All the Way Home*.

After a year off, however, Penn was coaxed back into movies by Warren Beatty to helm *Bonnie and Clyde*. Though they clashed during production, Beatty saw to it that he and Penn could cast the film with unknowns from New York theater and TV, shoot with no studio interference on location in Texas, and edit the film in New York. With his producer-star's full support, Penn aimed to make the violence as brutal as possible, culminating with the incendiary quick-cut, slow-motion climax showing the eponymous glamour outlaws riddled by bullets. Though critics were repulsed by the bloodshed and the notion of criminals as beautiful doomed heroes, Beatty, armed with a rave by Pauline Kael and reports of audience enthusiasm, fought Warner Bros. for a re-release and Penn's combination of French New Wave style with an American genre finally made an impact.

Hailed as a visionary work and embraced by the youthful Vietnam-era audience, *Bonnie and Clyde* became a pop-culture phenomenon, inspiring a cycle of revisionist gangster movies that included *Thieves Like Us* (1974) and *Badlands* (1973), making stars out of Faye Dunaway and Gene Hackman, and altering the visual language of Hollywood violence. Penn lost the Best Director Oscar, though, to *The Graduate*'s (1967) Mike Nichols.

Penn confirmed his place in the new Hollywood counterculture firmament with *Alice's Restaurant* (1969) and *Little Big Man* (1970). Adapted from Arlo Guthrie's song and starring Guthrie, *Alice's Restaurant* was a dreamy, satirical, fun, yet downcast look at life in a hippie commune that garnered Penn his third Oscar nod for directing. More epic in form and content, *Little Big Man* mordantly re-framed the glorious myth of the Western frontier as a tragic comedy of genocide and white stupidity and amorality. Though star Dustin Hoffman's misadventures as a snake oil salesman, gunfighter, and adopted Cheyenne provided comic relief, Penn's tough depiction of the Washita Massacre and different take on Custer's Last Stand powerfully revealed which side was "civilized." Though *Little Big Man* was a major hit, Penn took a hiatus from films (save for the omnibus documentary *Visions of Eight* [1973]) until *Night Moves* (1975). As with *The Long Goodbye* (1973) and *Chinatown* (1974), *Night Moves* recast the potent film noir detective as a man overwhelmed by the corruption he uncovers. Despite the presence of Gene Hackman as the doomed PI, *Night Moves*' rigorously downbeat tone was no longer in synch with audience tastes. Penn's next effort, *The Missouri Breaks* (1976), was intended to be a blockbuster pairing of Jack Nicholson and Marlon Brando as a horse thief and the gunfighter hired to kill him. Though Brando and Nicholson made a fascinating pair, the film's shifting tones and defiant eccentricity turned off audiences and critics. Penn didn't direct another film until his critique of the 1960s, *Four Friends* (1981).

Never able to recapture his late-'60s success, Penn directed only the workmanlike spy actioner *Target* (1985) and thriller *Dead of Winter* (1987) before the barely released *Penn & Teller Get Killed* (1990) essentially ended his feature-film career. Returning to the more welcoming environs of TV, Penn scored a critical success with *The Portrait* (1993), a finely crafted character study starring Gregory Peck and Lauren Bacall. The made-for-cable feature *Inside* (1996) dealt with the kind of politically charged subject matter — in this case, South African apartheid — reminiscent of Penn's best films. Though he was long past retirement age, Penn, via his director son Matthew Penn, signed on as an executive producer for *Law & Order*'s 2000 season to help punch up the long-running series' New York grit; a skill he exercised again helming an episode of Sidney Lumet's cable series *100 Centre Street* (2001). — **Lucia Bozzola**

Actors: [Reed Birney](#) , [Franchot Tone](#) , [Jeff Corey](#) , [Gene Hackman](#) , [Hurd Hatfield](#) , [M. Emmet Walsh](#) , [Warren Beatty](#)

Director - filmography

1. ["100 Centre Street"](#) (2001) TV Series (episode "The Fix")
2. [Inside](#) (1996) (TV)
3. [Lumière et compagnie](#) (1995)
... aka Lumière and Company (International: English title)
... aka Lumiere y compañía (Spain)
4. [The Portrait](#) (1993) (TV)
5. [Penn & Teller Get Killed](#) (1989)
... aka Dead Funny
6. [Dead of Winter](#) (1987)
7. [Target](#) (1985/I)
8. [Four Friends](#) (1981)
... aka Georgia's Friends
9. [The Missouri Breaks](#) (1976)
10. [Night Moves](#) (1975)
11. [Visions of Eight](#) (1973) (segment "The Hightest")
... aka München 1972 - 8 berühmte Regisseure sehen die Spiele der XX. Olympiade (West Germany)
... aka Olympiade München 1972 (West Germany: TV title)
... aka Olympic Visions (USA: TV title)
12. [Little Big Man](#) (1970)
13. [Alice's Restaurant](#) (1969)
14. [Flesh and Blood](#) (1968) (TV)
15. [Bonnie and Clyde](#) (1967)
... aka Bonnie and Clyde... Were Killers! (UK)
16. [The Chase](#) (1966)
17. [Mickey One](#) (1965)
18. [The Train](#) (1964) (uncredited; fired, replaced by John Frankenheimer)
... aka Il Treno (Italy)
... aka John Frankenheimer's The Train (USA: complete title)
... aka Le Train (France)
19. [The Miracle Worker](#) (1962)
20. [The Left Handed Gun](#) (1958)
21. ["Playhouse 90"](#) (1956) TV Series (episode "Portrait of a Murderer")
22. ["Playwrights '56"](#) (1955) TV Series
... aka The Playwright Hour
23. ["Goodyear Television Playhouse"](#) (1951) TV Series (multiple episodes)
... aka Goodyear Playhouse (new title)