

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Sydney Pollack Remembered

Elisa Leonelli · Sunday, June 30th, 2024



Sydney Pollack (c) Elisa Leonelli 1999

[Sydney Pollack](#) was born July 1, 1934, 90 years ago today. He passed away on May 26, 2008 at age 73. To celebrate his birthday I recall the many times I interviewed this talented film director.



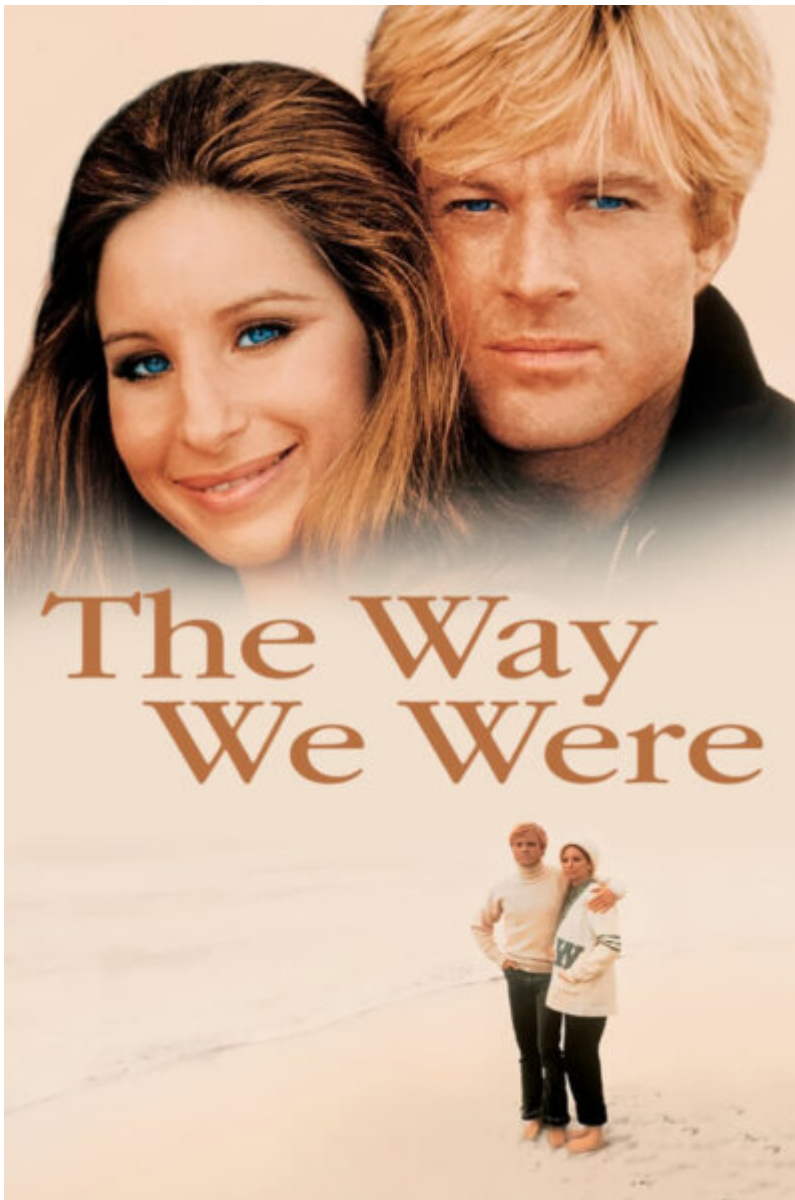
In 1990 I spoke with him about *Havana*, starring Robert Redford and Lena Olin. I wrote [an article](#) for the Italian film monthly CIAK. Here's a quote from Pollack: "Redford sometimes gets attacked for not messing himself up more in parts, but he's not a character actor, like Paul Muni was. Nobody wants to see him shave his head, put on a pot belly and have two teeth missing. I like to see Dustin Hoffman do it, or Jack Nicholson, but not Gary Cooper or Redford, you want him to be a hero."

Elisa Leonelli, Sydney Pollack (c) HFPA 1999

Here's some excerpt from the chapter titled "Redford and Pollack."

Redford had met Pollack when they were both acting in *War Hunt* (1962), he directed him for the first time in *This Property is Condemned* (1966) with Natalie Wood -a tragic love story set during the Depression- and they had become friends.

When Redford couldn't return the \$200,000 advance the studio had paid him to star in *Jeremiah Johnson*, because, says Pollack, "Sundance was eating up every nickel that he had. He was broke," the director had to personally guarantee to Warner Bros that he could shoot the film on location in Utah, for the same budget that it would cost to do it on the back-lot. "We were in a terrible jam and what ensued was a real testing of our friendship."



After their bonding experience in Utah, Pollack convinced Redford to accept the role of Hubbell Gardiner opposite Barbra Streisand in *The Way We Were*: "We needed someone strong enough to counter-balance Barbra. She'd been running all over her leading men." Redford hated this weak golden boy, who let himself be seduced by the easy life of money and privilege in Hollywood during the McCarthy era, while his wife was a Jewish activist committed to liberal causes. But

because he had a creative collaboration with the director, he was confident that Pollack would let him add some complex dimensions to make the character more interesting.

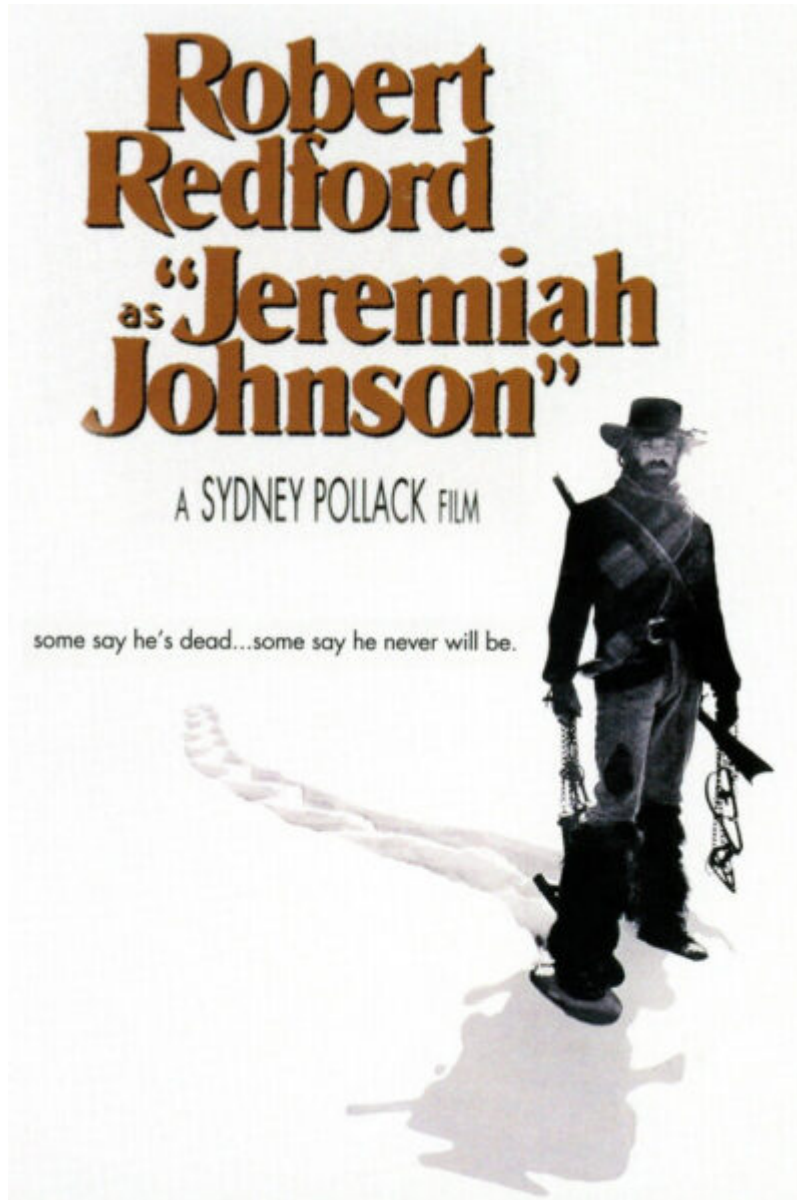


Pollack also directed Redford in the political thriller *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) with Faye Dunaway, from the novel by James Grady *Six Days of the Condor*, about a CIA reader whose life is in danger when he discovers an unauthorized intelligence system within the agency. Pollack directed Redford again in *Out of Africa* (1986) with Meryl Streep, about the real-life love story between Karen Blixen (Danish writer Isak Dinesen), a strong independent woman, and Denys Finch Hatton, an English safari hunter in Kenya who wants to maintain his freedom in the relationship. Then Pollack directed Redford in *Havana* (1990) with Lena Olin, another love story, set in Cuba at the eve of the Castro revolution, between a cynical gambler and a woman with strong political beliefs.



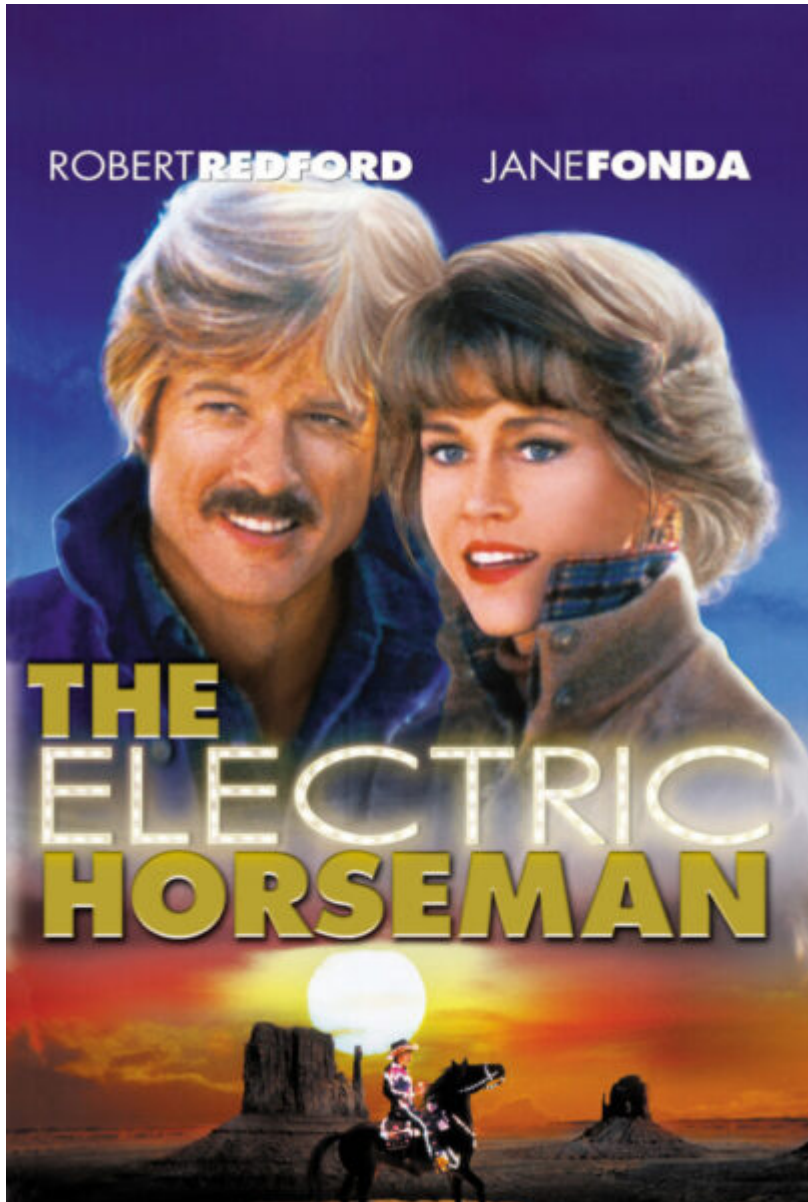
The director said about his special relationship with the actor: “In some ways we are very different; I tend to be over-organized, and maybe I drive him a little crazy, while he tends to be disorganized; but in the ways that are most important for any kind of collaboration, like taste or judgment of a scene, we are very similar, so in that sense we have had a very good working relationship for 25 years.”

Two movies where Pollack directed Redford have their own chapter in my book, because they fit my thesis that Redford’s work can be interpreted as emblematic of the best values of the American West.



“Jeremiah Johnson: The mountain man as frontier hero”

While working together on the *Jeremiah Johnson*'s storyline, Redford and Pollack felt uneasy about showing the brutal massacre of Johnson's family by Indians and they struggled to find a reason for the violence. The director says: “I was terribly concerned, in 1971, about doing a movie in which a band of Native Americans senselessly slaughter a woman, which was the original story in John Milius' script, that was taken from the story of the authentic Crow Killer. So most of the struggle and work that we did on it was to try to find some way to implicate him in his own demise, that his own behavior destroys him. It took months but we came up with the fact that he turned his back on civilization and decided to go away, and now civilization comes to him and asks him to do them a favor, and he does, for the best reasons, the wrong thing.”



"The Electric Horseman: The cowboy defies the corporation"

Pollack says he wanted to make a fairy-tale Western with an optimistic ending, where the disillusioned cowboy, through the love for his horse, rediscovers his true self in the simplicity of nature. He explains the connection between the cowboy and his horse: "He sees himself in the horse without knowing it; he's this guy who is a champion, and he extols this horse as a champion; he doesn't have the ego or the psychological sense to stand up for himself, but underneath he identifies with that horse, with the fact that he was once something and now he's been exploited by big business and there isn't any prestige awarded that kind of individualism anymore. He's sort of swallowed up in corporate America and he sees a metaphor for himself in this horse. So he kidnaps the horse and he redeems himself; by letting the horse go free he's gotten himself free of the AMPCO Corporation and all of that in some way."

Pollack concludes: "I believe that Redford played the same character in all the films where I directed him, we've watched that guy grow up, get older and come to the end of the line in *Havana*. He's essentially this unpossessable, unattached individualist, who believes there's some utopian way for him not to have to bend to the needs of a structured society, not to have to give up any of himself in order to either have a relationship or a sense of community, and finds that neither is possible. Except now he's aging, and he's no longer a young, handsome guy where that can

paper over the hard knocks of being alone. That's been a journey that we've made together since 1965."

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