

SinaiFree Film Society  
Special Edition

A conversation with renowned screen and stage actor *Nehemiah Persoff*  
Saturday, October 16th, 2021

PROLOGUE:  
VIEWING RECOMMENDATIONS

See also “Epilogue: Supplemental Resources,” on our website

Nehemiah Persoff is a consummate character actor, now 102 years old, who has appeared in 40+ films and over 400 TV episodes. On October 16, 2021, the SinaiFree Film Society was honored to host a conversation with Mr. Persoff in which synagogue members had the rare opportunity to ask him about his life and career and to hear rich and revealing memories of his experiences in film, television, and the theater.

In addition, our audience included members of The Actors Studio, the venerable institution where Mr. Persoff began his career in 1947, the year of its founding. Invited by cofounder Elia Kazan to join the first class, Mr. Persoff discovered that he was in the company of Marlon Brando, Montgomery Clift, Julie Harris, James Whitmore and other young hopefuls destined for notable careers as well (see also “For Whom the Bell Tolls,” p. 2, below). Although we did not realize it on October 16th, our conversation with Mr. Persoff marked the 74<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Actors Studio meeting, which took place on October 5, 1947. In his memoir, *The Many Faces of Nehemiah*, Mr. Persoff describes that momentous evening so long ago as “life changing”!

Prior to our program, we prepared the viewing recommendations below in consultation with Mr. Persoff, to help participants familiarize themselves with his work. The recommendations focus on several television episodes featuring Mr. Persoff during the ‘50s and ‘60s, a period of which he is particularly proud. Each has a link to a free online video (unfortunately, the quality is sometimes mediocre, and in a few cases, the opening credits are missing).

We are so grateful to Mr. Persoff for his invaluable involvement in the preparation of this entire document!

It is our hope that the Sinai Free community and all website visitors will continue to enjoy these episodes! We have also posted an “Epilogue” of supplemental resources with links to other interviews and to a fascinating 101<sup>st</sup> birthday tribute, Mr. Persoff’s complete filmography and his one-man show entitled *Nehemiah Persoff Tells Stories of Sholem Aleichem*.

But first and foremost, there is a link to [the recorded Film Society conversation](#) with Mr. Persoff on October 16<sup>th</sup>, in which he speaks with candor, humor, and gratitude about his life and about his five-decade career as a character actor in film (from the ‘50s – the last decade of Hollywood’s Golden Age – through the ‘90s), television and the theater.

WHAT IS A CHARACTER ACTOR?

In preparing for the SinaiFree Film Society program, Mr. Persoff explained to us the role of the character actor.

The character actor’s job is to support the leading actor (the star) in what he or she does, thereby reinforcing the image that the leading actor has carefully crafted over many years.

For example, he continued, in a scene from *Never Steal Anything Small* (1959), with James Cagney playing “Albert Anastasia” (head of the longshoremen’s association), he threatened me in his usual Cagney way. I wanted to show him that I’m not easily threatened, so I simply smiled at him. Instead of being angry, the brilliant James Cagney returned an even bigger smile, as if to say, *any way you want to play it, I can handle you*. And he systematically proceeded to destroy me, which was in keeping with his tough-guy image.

SELECTED VIEWING – TV EPISODES

Mr. Persoff’s TV career began in the ‘50s (during television’s Golden Age) and continued through the ‘90s. Over this fruitful period, he appeared in more than thirty-five series, including *Armstrong Circle Theatre*, *Playhouse 90*, *The Twilight Zone*, *Naked City*, *Route 66*, *Rawhide*, *The Big Valley*, *Hawaii Five-0*, *Mission Impossible*, *The Untouchables* (six times, including season 1, episode 1) and *Law & Order*.

As you watch the episodes listed below, please see whether you think that Mr. Persoff is accurate in his description (above) of what he does as a character actor.

*Armstrong Circle Theatre*: “The Contender” (opening scene: 1.5 min)  
S5, S13 (Nov 30, 1954)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FCUY0vRRiQM>

**Note:** In the opening scene, Mr. Persoff, as a punch-drunk fighter, poignantly captures the tragedy of a man who has given everything to the game and, in the end, is left selling handkerchiefs on the street and babbling to a former opponent (played by Paul Newman) about making a comeback.

Playhouse 90: **“For Whom the Bell Tolls”** (part 1: 1.5 h; part 2: 1.5 h)

Part 1: S3, E23 (Mar 12, 1959)

<https://vimeo.com/249285732>

Part 2: S3, E24 (Mar 19, 1959)

<https://vimeo.com/249435926>

**Note:** In this production, John Frankenheimer, the director, cast Jason Robards, Jr. as Robert Jordan, a role played by Gary Cooper in the 1943 film based on Ernest Hemingway’s novel. Although Robards did not project the same natural strength as Cooper, his performance gains power because his opponent, Pablo (played by Mr. Persoff), is so strong and determined. With a teleplay by A.E. Hotchner, this dramatization of the novel reunites Mr. Persoff with three close colleagues from The Actors Studio: Eli Wallach, Maureen Stapleton and Steven Hill. Hemingway took his title from a 17<sup>th</sup> century poem by John Donne about the interconnectedness of all human beings: “Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

Naked City: **“The Scorpion Sting”** (28 min)

S1, E37 (June 2, 1959)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nvqC2Y1R5U>

**Note:** The screenplay by Stirling Silliphant is based on a short story by Alfred Bester, who has been called “one of the handful of writers who invented modern science fiction.” [Wikipedia] But this is not sci-fi...just hauntingly dreamlike.

Route 66: **“Incident on a Bridge”** (52 min)

S1, E30 (June 16, 1961)

<https://vimeo.com/534983667>

**Note:** This is a tale of “beauty and the beast.” Mr. Persoff portrays Dvorovoi, an outcast whose appearance explains why he is called the “monkey man of Russian Hill.” His mere presence repels people, including Anna, played by Lois Smith (who won a Tony Award in 2021, at the age of 90), the beautiful and mute young woman whom he loves from afar. In addition to being a Russian surname, however, *dvorovoi* (from the Russian word *dvor*, for yard) means a Slavic spirit of the courtyard. Described by Anna’s father as an evil spirit, a *dvorovoi* is protective of certain farm animals, but potentially harmful to others and, at times, to people; according to Slavic mythology, a *dvorovoi* can be controlled if pinned to a fence with a pitchfork. The relation between the two meanings is revealed as the story of Dvorovoi and Anna reaches its climax and then moves toward an ending with a mystical, fairytale quality.

Route 66: **“First-Class Mouliak”** (51 min). For the definition of “mouliak,” please see bottom of p. 4.

S2, E5 (Oct 20, 1961)

<https://vimeo.com/534542828>

**Note:** Mr. Persoff portrays an old-fashioned steelworker who, before his wife died, promised her that their dearly beloved son (played by Robert Redford) would not suffer the indignity and danger of working in a steel mill as he has been forced to do. The father saved his pennies so that his son could go to college and earn his living in a more human, dignified way. After the daughter of Persoff’s friend (played by Martin Balsam) dies, evidence indicates that she was with Redford at the time, suggesting that the young man caused her death. Persoff and “Marty” Balsam were also close friends in life, so when “Marty” confronts “Nehemiah” with the accusation that his son committed murder, it was so forceful and real that Nehemiah could not help but take it personally. The scene assumed a life of its own. Reality and fiction became so intermingled that the anguish you see was also real.

**The Untouchables** (each episode is about 52 min long)

Mr. Persoff’s memoir, *The Many Faces of Nehemiah*, “fleshes out the saga of the Jewish immigrant experience in America.” (Jewish Journal, 9/9/21). Unfortunately, the Jewish American saga also includes a chapter on organized crime. In the 1930s, a number of Jewish mobsters were targeted by legendary federal agent Eliot Ness and his Prohibition-enforcement team, known as *The Untouchables*. Among them were Jake “Greasy Thumb” Guzik (born in Galicia in 1886) and Waxey Gordon (born Irving Wexler in 1888). The TV series features Guzik (one of Al Capone’s chief henchmen) in three episodes and Gordon in one, with Mr. Persoff portraying them both (see below).

The *Untouchables* is based on Ness’s autobiographical memoir of the same name, written with Oscar Fraley. Although fictionalized, the series accurately depicts the incorruptibility of the team (hence its name, *The Untouchables*). The staccato voice of Walter Winchell provides a perfect narrative accompaniment. Each episode is a mini-film noir.

Mr. Persoff’s distinctive portrayals in his six *Untouchables* episodes – all within a three-year period (1959-1962) – reveal his depth and range as a character actor.

**“The Empty Chair,” “The Seventh Vote”** and **“Doublecross”** are, in effect, a trilogy in which Mr. Persoff menacingly portrays Jake “Greasy Thumb” Guzik, the treasurer and political “greaser” of the Capone organization. Although Guzik eschews outright murder, he has his own brand of brutality and ruthlessness.

**“The Empty Chair”** (opening credits missing)

(S1 E1; Oct 15, 1959)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMFtGiFWC1w>

*Note:* The title refers to the seat, now conspicuously vacant, from which Al Capone presided over meetings until being sent to federal prison in 1931 for income tax evasion. The ensuing power vacuum leads to an ugly conflict between Guzik and his chief enemy within the organization. Although disparagingly called “bookkeeper” by his rival, Guzik is more than shrewd enough to fight back.

**“The Seventh Vote”**

(S2, E29; May 18, 1961)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wj3NbeOqERO>

*Note:* With Capone in prison, the organization has only six voting members, who are equally divided into two warring factions. To gain control of the Outfit and implement a strategy that would protect it from future tax evasion charges, Guzik is desperate to bring in a seventh vote on his side.

**“Doublecross”** (opening credits missing)

(S4, E12; Dec 18, 1962)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GI0McVW52rA>

*Note:* Guzik makes a deal with arch-rival Bugs Moran in an effort to buy more bootleg liquor so that the Outfit can remain in business. But his complex scheme must be designed to escape detection by federal agent Eliot Ness and the Untouchables.

**“Head of Fire: Feet of Clay”** (opening credits missing)

S1, E27 (April 21, 1960)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-tzKAN\\_Cd0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h-tzKAN_Cd0)

*Note:* Played by Mr. Persoff, Johnny Fortunato is a nattily dressed hoodlum who fixes fights and dares Eliot Ness to find something that will send him back to prison, from which he was recently released. Each face-off between these two enemies is a study in simmering hostility. The episode title, “Feet of Clay,” comes from the Book of Daniel and refers to a fundamental flaw in an otherwise revered person. What does it mean here, and what is the “Head of Fire”? These are questions for you, the viewer, to ponder.

**“The Waxey Gordon Story”**

S2, E4 (Nov 10, 1960)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8Z83uE5Vk>

*Note:* When bootlegger Waxey Gordon (Mr. Persoff) confidently tries to bribe Eliot Ness (Robert Stack), he receives an unequivocal lesson in what it means to be untouchable. A website dedicated to the series describes this confrontation between the two adversaries as “the hour’s most memorable scene” – “a masterclass not only in acting, writing and directing, but into Desilu’s Untouchables lore...” On the website you’ll find a gorgeously restored video of this scene that will enable you to feel its full effect: <https://theuntouchables.co/the-waxey-gordon-story/>. In the full-length video, it is at 32:09.

**“The Stryker Brothers”**

S3, E18 (Mar 8, 1962)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZbIxiWpUMA>

*Note:* Mr. Persoff’s character, Mr. Jaeger, is a soft-spoken arsonist who agrees to do a job for the violent Stryker brothers, but with one unusual condition. In watching this episode, keep in mind that both Mr. Persoff and Robert Stack (Eliot Ness) were born in 1919, yet they portray characters of markedly different ages. Ness is vigorous and in his prime, while Persoff’s Mr. Jaeger is an elderly man with a shuffling gait – a classic illustration of the art of character acting.

**Explanatory note (this is based on informal investigation only, and not on scholarly research):** “Mouliak” (or “moolyak”): of uncertain origin. Possibly from the Polish “mul” (mule) or “mój” (mine/my own), + “jak” (like/as). If derived from “mój,” it might be a way that fellow Poles refer to one another. It is unclear whether the two spellings are variations of the same word, or two different words. Neither appears to be in standard dictionaries, but both are found online. According to WorldCat Identities, a “mouliak” is “a strong, fearless worker.” But the Urban Dictionary website defines “moolyak” as “an idiot, a moron” and attributes it to the sitcom Cheers (1982-1993), in which it is used. This type of usage also occurs on blogs and other websites. Its meaning in “First-Class Mouliak,” decades earlier, seems ambiguous, however. When Mr. Persoff’s character describes himself as a “good mouliak,” it denotes “a strong, fearless worker” (at 10:48 in the video). But the episode title may also connote a man (Mr. Persoff’s character) who comes to realize that he has behaved like a fool, or possibly an idiot, toward his beloved son. Thus far, there seems to be no available explanation of what the scriptwriter intended.