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Robert Caplin for The New York Times

The director and teacher Jack Garfein at the Actors Studio on Tuesday. The Film Forum is hosting a tribute to him next week.

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL Published: March 16, 2011

Not long after surviving 11 German concentration camps, 15-year-old Jack Garfein, once down to a skeletal 48 pounds, found his life's work. The displaced-person's camp in Sweden where he was recuperating staged a play. The youth was cast to type — as a child in a concentration camp.

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Columbia Pictures

Ben Gazzara, right, with Clifton James in the 1957 film "The Strange One," one of the two films Mr. Garfein directed.

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He knew little of acting. But in a moment of unscripted emotion, when a guard in the show tossed away a cigarette, young Jack darted after it and sneaked the precious butt into his shoe, drawing cheers of recognition from the audience. He was stage-bit.

This week, after a lifetime in drama, some of it bumpy and the last quarter-century in Paris, Mr. Garfein, now 80 and looking a little bit like Anthony Hopkins, came home to New York for a tribute at the Film Forum, a book-signing and a master class at the Actors Studio, where he had nurtured his talent alongside Elia Kazan, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Ben Gazzara and Carroll Baker —

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Photofest, via Film Forum

Carroll Baker in "Something Wild," Jack Garfein's 1961 film. Ms. Baker and Mr. Garfein were married for 13 years.

whom he wed in Lee Strasberg's apartment as Isaac Stern played the violin.

"Orson Welles once said, 'If there had not been a Jack Garfein, Hollywood would have invented him,' " Ms. Baker, who divorced Mr. Garfein in a bitter breakup after 13 years of marriage, wrote in an acerbic 1983 autobiography, "Baby Doll."

But Ms. Baker, now 79, was admiring in a recent interview. "In my opinion, he is the greatest living acting teacher," she said. "Jack helped me more than anybody."

The tribute, [at the Film Forum](#) on Houston Street on Sunday and Monday, includes a documentary about Mr. Garfein's return to Auschwitz, "A Journey Back" (1987), and rare screenings of the only two films he directed: "The Strange One" (1957), with Mr. Gazzara as a sadistic cadet at a military school in the South, and "Something Wild" (1961), with Ms. Baker as a schoolgirl raped and held captive in a harsh yet ultimately redeeming Manhattan, with music by Aaron Copland.

Why only two films? He had his run-ins with Hollywood, Mr. Garfein acknowledged, clashing with Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures and the powerful producer Sam Spiegel.

"O.K., I had some degree of arrogance," Mr. Garfein said. "I've been bullied by bigger people than them." Eventually, he said, the director George Stevens told him, " 'You're on the country club blacklist,' " meaning that studio heads had agreed over golf that he was not to be worked with.

Mr. Gazzara, 80, recalled meeting "this little fella with big red hair" when he and Mr. Garfein both studied acting in Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop around 1949. "Jack was a bad boy," he said, smiling at the memory.

But the years have mellowed Mr. Garfein. On Tuesday night, before a rapt audience of theater people and friends and his two children with Ms. Baker, the classical composer Herschel Garfein and the actress Blanche Baker, Mr. Garfein regaled a master class at [the Actors Studio](#) on West 44th Street. He referred to Proust, Pushkin, T. S. Eliot, Socrates and Henry Miller as he explored the mysteries of acting, which he called the most difficult art to fathom and explain.

"Take the greatest poets," he said. "I'd like to see them write in front of 1,000 people. I'd like to see someone go to Lucien Freud and say: 'In three weeks, we need this painting. Oh, that's the wrong color.' "

Afterward, Mr. Garfein signed copies of his recent memoir and manual, "Life and Acting" (Northwestern University Press, 2010), carried in by his literary agent, Barbara Hogenson.

Certainly Mr. Garfein's life offered no lack of material. Fleeing the Nazis from Slovakia to Hungary, he and his mother and sister were deported in 1944 to Auschwitz, where his mother managed to shove him into a line of laborers as she and her 8-year-old daughter were bound for the gas chamber. He was saved, he said, by an inmate who convinced the Nazi doctor Josef Mengele that they were mosaic artists who could serve the Germans. "I never saw that old man again," Mr. Garfein said. "When I read 'The Iliad' I realized it's true — the gods come down in the guise of humans."

Shuttled among 10 more concentration camps, Mr. Garfein was forced to bury bodies

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and survived a death march before being liberated at Bergen-Belsen in April 1945. His father and a hundred other relatives had perished. A distant uncle helped bring him from Sweden to New York, where, he said, he received free medical care from Dr. Max Jacobson, who was gaining renown for administering amphetamines to celebrities and, it would emerge, to President John F. Kennedy, before accidentally killing a patient, the photographer Mark Shaw, and being stripped of his medical license.

The United Jewish Appeal used young Jacob, his given name, to represent child survivors, and he participated in a fund-raising appeal. At one point, according to a 1946 article in The New York Times, he presented a philanthropist with a bittersweet token of thanks — his yellow Star of David that the Germans had forced Jews to wear.

At Joan of Arc High School, Jack was assigned to write a composition on how he spent his summer vacation. "I was going to say 'laying railroad track for the Germans,' " he recalled recently, "but I just made something up."

Bent on becoming an actor, he won a scholarship to the Piscator workshop and then joined the Actors Studio. In 1953, he directed his first show off-Broadway, "End as a Man," which he later filmed as the movie "The Strange One," a dark fable with homoerotic undertones and film debuts by Mr. Gazzara, George Peppard, [Pat Hingle](#), Arthur Storch and Julie Wilson.

In 1967 he opened the Actors Studio West in Los Angeles, and in 1986 he left for Paris to direct an Athol Fugard production. He stayed to open [his own acting studio](#), met an actress who would become his second wife and had two children. But now, divorced again, he said he was contemplating returning to New York for good.

Despite all his pain, he has been lucky in life, he said. "That line from 'Streetcar' always breaks me up," he said. " 'Whoever you are, I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.' "

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