

NATALIE PORTMAN

Israeli-born actor

An actor on stage and on film, Portman is best known for her role as Padmé Amidala in the Star Wars prequel trilogy (1999, 2002, 2005).

BORN: June 9, 1981; Jerusalem, Israel

ALSO KNOWN AS: Natalie Hershlag (birth name)

AREA OF ACHIEVEMENT: Entertainment

EARLY LIFE

Natalie Portman (PORT-mihn) was born June 9, 1981. Her father, medical student Avner Hershlag, and mother, Shelley Stevens, met at the Jewish student center at Ohio State University during the 1970's. Shelley's ancestors had immigrated to the United States from Austria and Russia, and Avner's parents had immigrated to Israel from Poland after World War II. Avner's grandparents and several more of his relatives died during the Holocaust.

Avner and Shelley corresponded after he returned to Israel and were married when she visited him a few years later. Portman was born in Jerusalem in 1981, making her an Israeli citizen, and she was also an American citizen through her mother. In 1984, the Hershlags moved to

the United States, where Avner became a resident surgeon in obstetrics and gynecology at George Washington University Medical Center in Washington, D.C. Portman attended the Charles E. Smith Jewish Day School in Rockville, Maryland, while they lived in the area. The family relocated to Connecticut in 1988 when Avner received a fellowship to do research on fertility and reproduction at Yale University. In 1990, the Hershlags settled permanently in Long Island, New York, when Avner accepted positions at North Shore University Hospital on Long Island and New York University School of Medicine.

Portman attended a Jewish elementary school, the Solomon Schechter Day School of Glen Cove, New York, after the move and took ballet lessons until she was thirteen. She graduated from the Syosset High School, a secular public school, in 1999. During the summers, Portman attended the Usdan Center for the Creative and Performing Arts in Huntington, New York, and the Stage-door Manor Performing Arts Camp in the Catskills. In June, 2003, Portman graduated from Harvard University with a bachelor's degree in psychology.

Already bilingual in Hebrew and English, Portman has studied French, Japanese, German, and Arabic. In high school, she took all the science courses the school offered and was a semifinalist in the Intel Science Talent Search. In 2002, she cowrote a paper on memory in infants for a joint project between Harvard's medical school and its Laboratory for Infant Study.

LIFE'S WORK

Although Portman was a full-time student until 2003, she began acting professionally when she was only eleven. In 1992, she was chosen to understudy Britney Spears, who was playing the leading role in the Off-Broadway musical *Ruthless!* Portman's film career began when she was cast in the role of a child who befriends a middle-aged assassin, played by Jean Reno, in Luc Besson's 1994 film *The Professional*. Soon after getting the part, she adopted her maternal grandmother's maiden name, Portman, as her professional name. In 1994, she appeared in the short television film *Developing*.

Portman played minor roles in the films



Natalie Portman. (AFP/Getty Images)

Heat (1995), *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), and *Mars Attacks!* (1996) and a major role in *Beautiful Girls* (1996). She turned down the role of the title character in the 1997 remake of *Lolita*, because it was too similar to the characters she had played in *The Professional* and *Beautiful Girls*. From 1997 to 1998, Portman played the title character in a new adaptation of *The Diary of Anne Frank* on Broadway. She turned down a costarring role opposite Susan Sarandon in the film *Anywhere but Here* (1999) after learning it would involve a sex scene. However, she accepted the part after Sarandon insisted that the script be rewritten deleting the scene.

In 1995, George Lucas cast Portman as Padmé Amidala in the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy: *The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). She played a unwed teenage mother who gives birth in a Wal-Mart in *Where the Heart Is* (2000). This was the first film in which she was the primary star. Portman appeared in New York City's Public Theater production of Anton Chekhov's *Chayka* (1896; *The Seagull*, 1909) in July, 2001. The cast included Meryl Streep, Kevin Kline, and Philip Seymour Hoffman. Portman made a cameo appearance in the film *Zoolander* (2001) and appeared briefly as a widow in the film *Cold Mountain* (2003).

Portman appeared in the independent films *Garden State* and *Closer* in 2004. The latter film featured her critically acclaimed role as Alice, an exotic dancer who becomes the mistress of a novelist (Jude Law). In the science fiction thriller *V for Vendetta* (2005), Portman played a young woman who is saved from the secret police by the main character, known only by the initial V. Portman worked with a voice coach to speak with an English accent and allowed her head to be shaved. Another film, *Free Zone*, also came out in 2005.

Director Miloš Forman cast her in *Goya's Ghosts* (2006); although he had not seen any of her film work, he thought she looked like a Francisco Goya painting. In 2007, Portman starred in the fantasy film *Mr. Magorium's Wonder Emporium* and the road film *My Blueberry Nights*. Portman appeared in *The Other Boleyn Girl*, a historical drama in which she plays Anne Boleyn, the second wife of England's King Henry VIII, in 2008. In 2009, she starred opposite Tobey Maguire and Jake Gyllenhaal in the contemporary drama *Brothers*. In 2010, she appeared in *Black Swan*, in which she played a bal-

QUEEN PADMÉ AMIDALA OF STAR WARS

After seeing Natalie Portman in *The Professional* (1994), director George Lucas decided to cast her as Padmé Amidala for the three new *Star Wars* films he was planning. He judged that she could grow with the role from a teenager to become the wife of Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader) and mother of Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa. Portman was one of the few members of her generation who had never seen the original *Star Wars* (1977), either on television or in rerelease in the theaters, so she did not know what to expect. She was sixteen during the filming of *The Phantom Menace* (1999), nineteen during *Attack of the Clones* (2002), and twenty-two when Lucas filmed *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). Portman worked with a dialect coach to learn how to speak without a regional accent, and she studied the films of Lauren Bacall, Katharine Hepburn, and Audrey Hepburn to learn how to walk and talk with authority while remaining feminine. For the *Star Wars* films, the dialogue was rather simple, but the action was demanding physically, and Portman sprained her ankle during the filming of *The Phantom Menace*. Reviews were mixed, but the films were among the highest grossing of all time and have made Portman an extremely wealthy woman.

lerina and for which she won a Golden Globe and an Academy Award for Best Actress.

SIGNIFICANCE

Portman starred in three of the six *Star Wars* films. By 2008, the series had grossed more than \$5.5 billion, making it the third most commercially successful film franchise in history, behind the *James Bond* and *Harry Potter* films. In addition to Portman being the model for an action figure, Portman's image has appeared on posters, cans of Diet Pepsi, boxes of Kentucky Fried Chicken, and other merchandise items. Because she is a vegetarian, the Kentucky Fried Chicken image was embarrassing for Portman, but her contract gave her no say over how her image could be used. Portman received a Golden Globe nomination for best supporting actress for her role in *Anywhere but Here*. Her performance in *Closer* earned her a supporting actress Golden Globe and a nomination for an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress.

—Thomas R. Feller

FURTHER READING

Dickerson, James L. *Natalie Portman: Queen of Hearts*.

Toronto: ECW Press, 2002. Biography of Portman written for young adults.

Hemphill, Meg. "Natalie Portman." *In Style* (November,

2006): 95. Pictorial profile of Portman emphasizing the clothing she likes to wear plus still photos from her films.

Johnson, Anna. "Natalie, Naturally." *In Style* 14, no. 13 (December, 2007): 154. Illustrated profile of Portman pointing out that she has a life outside her films.

Portman, Natalie. "Ten Questions." *Time* (March 10, 2008): 4. Interview with Portman, including questions submitted by readers, discussions of her favorite historical period, and her opinions on the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Stein, Daniele. "Sister Act." *W* 37, no. 3 (March, 2008):

434. Interview with Portman and Scarlet Johansson, Portman's costar in *The Other Boleyn Girl*.

Weber, Bruce. "The Good Girl." *Teen Vogue* (December, 2007): 192-195. Illustrated profile of Portman with considerable space devoted to her favorite charity.

Wood, Gaby. "Natural Natalie." *Marie Claire* (January, 2010): 100-109. Profile of Portman, with attention to her experiences as a child star, the variety of directors with whom she has worked, and her first experience as the subject of a tabloid story.

SEE ALSO: Lauren Bacall; Goldie Hawn; Winona Ryder.

CHAIM POTOK

Novelist and scholar

A scholar who grew up in the ultra-Orthodox Hasidic community in New York, Potok is best known for his novels, such as The Chosen (1967). In it he depicts the conflicts and moral dilemmas faced by those who belong to the Hasidic community and who wish to take part in secular American society.

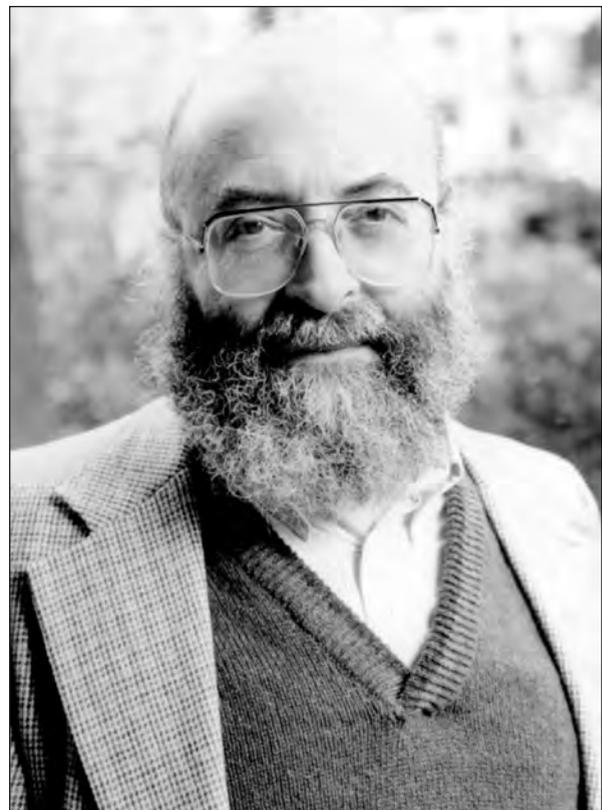
BORN: February 17, 1929; Bronx, New York
DIED: July 23, 2002; Merion, Pennsylvania
ALSO KNOWN AS: Chaim Tzvi; Herman Harold Potok (full name)
AREAS OF ACHIEVEMENT: Literature; scholarship; religion and theology

EARLY LIFE

Chaim Potok (KI-ihm POH-tahk) was born in a Jewish area in the Bronx to Benjamin Max Potok and Mollie Friedman. Chaim Potok's family belonged to the ultra-Orthodox Hasidic branch of Judaism, although the young Potok did not wear the traditional dark clothes and long sidelocks of the Hasidim. He attended religious Jewish schools, however, including the Talmudic Academy High School and Yeshiva University in New York, from which he graduated in 1950 after studying both Judaism and English literature.

From an early age Potok was interested in the arts. Around the age of nine he took up painting, but his father, who at first tolerated this pursuit, eventually told him to give it up because it violated Jewish customs. As a result, Potok shifted to writing, which was somewhat more acceptable to his devout family. When he was a teenager he discovered the novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) by Evelyn Waugh. Potok found this story of an aristocratic

Catholic family revelatory both for the way a novel could transport him into another world and for its exploration of the clash between a religious subculture (Catholicism) and a mainstream secular culture. He found something



Chaim Potok. (©Jerry Bauer)

similar when he read James Joyce's coming-of-age novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914), a few years later, and he decided he wanted to write novels about the clash between Judaism and secular culture.

To learn more about Judaism Potok attended the Jewish Theological Seminary, where he was ordained as a rabbi in 1954. However, his intention was not to serve as a rabbi in a synagogue, and he never had a congregation, though he did serve as a U.S. Army chaplain in South Korea in the aftermath of the Korean War, from 1955 through 1957. He later said his time in Korea changed him greatly, for it made him realize that half the world had never heard of Judaism and there was no anti-Semitism there.

On his return to the United States, Potok taught Jewish studies at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles and then began studying for a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania, which he completed in 1965, in part while living in Israel. During this period, he also worked for the journal *Conservative Judaism*, having earlier shifted his religious affiliation from Orthodox Judaism to the more moderate Conservative movement.

LIFE'S WORK

Although he received an encouraging rejection letter when he submitted a short story to *The Atlantic Monthly* at the age of seventeen, Potok did not publish any fiction, except in the school yearbook at Yeshiva University, until the mid-1960's, when he was more than thirty years old. In the late 1950's, he wrote a novel about his experiences in Korea, but it did not find a publisher. He finally published some short stories in 1964 and 1966, and then suddenly he became a success with his first published novel, *The Chosen*, in 1967, on which he had been working for seven years.

Over the next twenty-five years Potok published another seven novels, most of them exploring the same situation he presented in *The Chosen*: the challenge of being a religious Jew in secular America. In his early novels, such as *The Chosen* and *My Name Is Asher Lev* (1972), Potok typically presented coming-of-age narratives about the moral dilemmas facing young men in Orthodox or ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities. In 1985, in *Davita's Harp*, he varied this approach to present the trials of a young woman raised by nonreligious, communist parents. In 1992, Potok drew on his experiences in Korea to depict the struggle for survival of a Korean peasant family in *I Am the Clay*.

At the same time that he was writing fiction, Potok

THE CHOSEN

Chaim Potok's extraordinarily successful literary debut, *The Chosen* (1967), begins with a dramatic baseball scene in which one of the two central characters nearly takes out the eye of the other. It is a gripping moment, not only for its action but also for the raw emotions it conjures, mostly hatred on both sides. Potok's achievement is showing how negative emotions can exist and create problems, even in two characters who are essentially decent. This is a novel full of tension, even though after the baseball scene there is little real action. Mostly the two central characters, Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter, talk with each other or with their fathers, and the main dramatic moments are heated discussions about rabbinical commentaries. There is also a central tension related to the fact that Saunders is the son of the leader of an ultra-Orthodox Hasidic group who expects his son to succeed him, while Saunders wants to escape Hasidic isolation to become a psychologist in the secular world.

Probably Potok's greatest achievement in the novel is to bring to life the world of Hasidic Jews, to humanize them and make them understandable as people rather than as the dangerous aliens they seem to Malter in the opening chapter. Potok also lets readers see that even within the religious Jewish community there are divisions, and above all he is able to create a warmhearted story focusing on education and scholarship, in which two boys become friends and face moral dilemmas bravely.

pursued a scholarly career, working for the Jewish Publication Society, eventually becoming its editor in chief and assisting in its new translation of the Hebrew Bible. He also served as a visiting professor at the University of Pennsylvania and other universities, and in 1978 he published *Wanderings: Chaim Potok's History of the Jews*, a popular history but one based on serious scholarly work. It focused on the recurring theme in his fictional works, that of the clash between Judaism and other cultures.

In his last years he wrote books for children, including *The Tree of Here* (1993) and *The Sky of Now* (1995), and a nonfictional account of a Jewish family in the Soviet Union, *The Gates of November* (1996). He also tried his hand at playwrighting and cowrote the autobiography of the violinist Isaac Stern. He published a collection of three novellas under the title *Old Men at Midnight* (2001), which some saw as among his darkest works. He won a number of awards, including the Edward Lewis

Wallant Award for *The Chosen*, which was also nominated for a National Book Award and which was made into a film starring Rod Steiger in 1981. In the mid-1970's, he moved with his family—his wife Adena and their three children—to Israel, where they lived for four years. They returned to the United States and settled in Merion, a suburb of Philadelphia, where Potok lived until 2002, when he died of cancer.

SIGNIFICANCE

Potok is often contrasted with Philip Roth and Saul Bellow, writers who focused on describing assimilated, secular Jews in their fiction. In contrast, Potok described the world of religious Jews, especially the world of the ultra-Orthodox Hasidim. He is also notable for exploring the conflict between that world and the secular world, or, more precisely, the conflict within the religious Jewish community over how to deal with the secular world: to pursue isolation or engagement.

Potok's books were huge best sellers, in part because of the appeal of the exotic world he described and in part because the dynamics of the clash between a religious subculture and the larger secular culture surrounding it struck a chord with those in other subcultures. Potok is notable for writing novels of ideas, focusing on such important issues as the moral responsibility of scientists, anti-Semitism, and the demands of religion and of art.

—Sheldon Goldfarb

OTTO PREMINGER

Austrian-born actor, director, and producer

A fiercely independent filmmaker who chafed under Hollywood's studio system, Preminger brought an elegance and a sophistication to the genre of film noir in the 1940's.

BORN: December 5, 1906; Vienna, Austro-Hungarian Empire (now in Austria)

DIED: April 23, 1986; New York, New York

ALSO KNOWN AS: Otto Ludwig Preminger (full name)

AREA OF ACHIEVEMENT: Entertainment

EARLY LIFE

Otto Preminger (AH-toh PRE-mihn-jur) was born in 1906 in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father, Markus, a public prosecutor, was a well-

FURTHER READING

Abramson, Edward A. *Chaim Potok*. Boston: Twayne, 1986. Includes detailed, sophisticated analyses of Potok's early novels, a chronology (up to 1985), and an annotated bibliography.

McClymond, Kathryn. "The Chosen: Defining American Judaism." *Shofar* 25, no. 2 (2007): 4-23. Distinguishes Potok from Roth and Bellow. Notes how Potok depicts divisions within Judaism and shows the Jewish religious community as being part of American life.

Sternlicht, Sanford. *Chaim Potok: A Critical Companion*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000. Includes a biographical sketch and a detailed analysis of each of Potok's novels (although the analysis is not sophisticated). Contains useful background information and a bibliography.

Walden, Daniel, ed. *Conversations with Chaim Potok*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001. A collection of interviews in which Potok talks about his writing, religion, Jewish history, and his life. Includes a chronology (up to 2000).

_____, ed. "The World of Chaim Potok." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 4 (1985). A collection of essays on various aspects of Potok and his work.

SEE ALSO: Sholom Aleichem; Saul Bellow; Howard Fast; Bernard Malamud; Henry Pereira Mendes; Philip Roth; Isaac Stern.

respected official in Emperor Franz Josef's administration, even though as a Jew he refused the government request that he convert to Catholicism. Young Preminger grew up in Vienna, which he later described as a rather provincial city when compared to the culturally diverse and dynamic Berlin, where he first pursued his career.

When Preminger decided he wanted to become an actor and explore a career in the theater, his tolerant father did not object, except to say that he hoped his son would have another profession to rely on, should acting prove to be a less-than-sustaining occupation. Preminger earned a law degree, but he never practiced as an attorney. His early years were happy, although he later described an incident in which he was attacked by a group of anti-Semitic boys. Not wishing to alarm his parents, Preminger never told

them about the beating. The repercussions of this incident, however, had a marked impact later on his work in theater and in film.

Successful roles in several productions of William Shakespeare's plays brought Preminger to the attention of the famous director Max Reinhardt, who treated Preminger as a protégé. Soon Preminger was directing his own productions, deciding early on that he would pursue his career in the United States. In April, 1935, he made a sudden decision to go to the United States after meeting the American film producer Joseph Schenck, who assured Preminger that he would find employment in Hollywood. Although he had yet to master English and he did not know how he would support his wife, Marion, whom he had married in 1932 and who had given up her theatrical career for his sake, Preminger arrived in Hollywood seeking work at Schenck's studio, Twentieth Century-Fox.

LIFE'S WORK

At first, Preminger thrived in the studio system, even though he quickly gained a reputation as a dictatorial director. However, actors who knew their lines and adapted to Preminger's firm ideas of how a film should be shot and acted in did well for him. Then Preminger ran afoul of Twentieth Century-Fox's production chief Darryl F. Zanuck. The two strong-willed men quarreled over the filming of *Kidnapped* (1938), an adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's classic 1886 novel. By the end of 1937, Zanuck had bought out Preminger's contract. Preminger was unable to obtain work in Hollywood, so he moved to New York City, where he became a successful Broadway director and an actor, performing as a Nazi in the hit play *Margin for Error* (1939). This role brought him to the attention of screenwriter Nunnally Johnson, and before long Preminger was again in Hollywood, performing in a series of roles that capitalized on his rather menacing stage presence.

At the same time, Preminger continued to regard himself as a director, and during Zanuck's absence from Twentieth Century-Fox to serve in the Army, Preminger was again able to act and to direct with the approval of Zanuck's replacement, William Goetz. Almost immedi-



Otto Preminger. (AP/Wide World Photos)

ately Preminger began to seek out scripts that he could direct or produce for the studio. Film history was made when Preminger singled out a script based on Vera Caspary's novel *Laura* (1943), the story of a police detective who falls in love with the portrait of a beautiful woman who has been murdered—or so it seems until the beautiful woman returns to the scene of the crime. The story then becomes the detective's mission to find out the identity of the woman who was murdered and why Laura had been the target. By this time, Zanuck had returned to the studio, determined not to let Preminger direct, although he tolerated Preminger's role as producer. It soon became clear, even to Zanuck, that Preminger alone knew how to direct the script and how to obtain the best performances from the film's cast. Indeed, the film made stars out of its three principals: Clifton Webb, Dana Andrews, and Gene Tierney. *Laura* (1944) became one of the celebrated films of the 1940's and remains high in the estimation of film critics. Preminger was then assigned to direct several films, including *Fallen Angel* (1945), *Daisy Kenyon* (1947), and *Where the Sidewalk Ends* (1950). This acclaimed work displayed Preminger's talent for long takes with fluid camera movements. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he disliked cuts in scenes, and whenever possible he made the camera move toward or away from the actors rather than stop the action of a scene to adjust camera placement. This approach to filmmaking was influenced by his theater

FILMING THE FOUNDING OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL

Otto Preminger made a painstaking effort to be accurate historically in his films—in other words, to make his fictional story about the founding of Israel, *Exodus* (1960), congruent with the sequence of historical events. Above all, he wanted to be true to the human complexity of the story, which meant, in his view, rejecting the anti-British and anti-Arab attitudes reflected in the novel on which it was based. After interviewing Israelis about the British presence in the Middle East, Preminger concluded that although the British could be criticized for inhibiting, in certain ways, the drive for statehood, many Israelis regarded the British as having withdrawn finally from their occupation of Palestine with considerable understanding and empathy for Israeli sentiments. Anti-Semitism among the British is explored in the film, but it is not used simply to reject the British character. Equally important was Preminger's decision to film on location in places where the war took place. He wanted to get as close as possible to the reality of events.

work. He put the movement of his actors first and rarely sought to emphasize the technical virtuosity of the film industry.

However, Preminger chafed under the confines of the studio system that did not allow him to explore his social and political concerns. He was denied the opportunity to direct *Pinky* (1949), a film about racism that spoke to his own searing memories of the anti-Semitism he had experienced in Vienna. (Elia Kazan directed the film.)

As soon as his contract with Twentieth Century-Fox was fulfilled, the director embarked on an illustrious career as an independent filmmaker, supervising every aspect of his films, including their editing and marketing. A fierce opponent of censorship, he refused to make changes in scenes when asked by film distributors and by Hollywood executives. In films such as *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955) and *The Cardinal* (1963), he took on controversial subjects, such as drug addiction and the politics of the Catholic Church. *Exodus* (1960), based on Leon Uris's novel, deals directly with Preminger's Jewish heritage. He carefully developed a screenplay dealing with the founding of the state of Israel, but he had a falling-out with his staunchly pro-Israel collaborator, Uris, who objected to Preminger's desire to portray both the Jews and the Arabs with empathy. Preminger's first two

marriages failed, but his marriage to Hope Bryce produced two children and lasted until his death in 1986 from complications of lung cancer and Alzheimer's disease.

SIGNIFICANCE

Preminger brought an elegance and a sophistication to the genre of film noir in 1940's Hollywood and to films that provided strong parts for women. His role in establishing the independent producer not bound by Hollywood conventions and censorship is even more important. He was not afraid to take on momentous issues, such as the founding of the state of Israel, in his films. Preminger's body of work shows his keen sensitivity to the dignity of minority groups and his opposition to any form of discrimination. He transformed Georges Bizet's opera *Carmen* (1875) into *Carmen Jones* (1954), a story about African Americans. He also filmed George Gershwin's 1935 opera of African American life, *Porgy and Bess* (1959). Several of Preminger's films have become classics, including *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) and *Advise & Consent* (1962).

—Carl Rollyson

FURTHER READING

- Fujiwara, Chris. *The World and Its Double: The Life and Work of Otto Preminger*. New York: Faber & Faber, 2008. A comprehensive biography by an astute film critic. Includes filmography, film stills, and detailed notes section.
- Pratley, Gerald. *The Cinema of Otto Preminger*. New York: A. S. Barnes, 1971. Based on interviews with the director. Provides an introduction to Preminger's life and career, concentrating on his films and his Jewish background in Austria. Includes detailed filmography and several film stills.
- Preminger, Otto. *Preminger: An Autobiography*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977. A detailed account of his life and career up to the making of *The Cardinal* and his third marriage. Includes a filmography, film stills, and index.

SEE ALSO: George Cukor; Stanley Donen; George Gershwin; Stanley Kramer; Ernst Lubitsch; Joseph L. Mankiewicz; Irving Thalberg; Leon Uris.