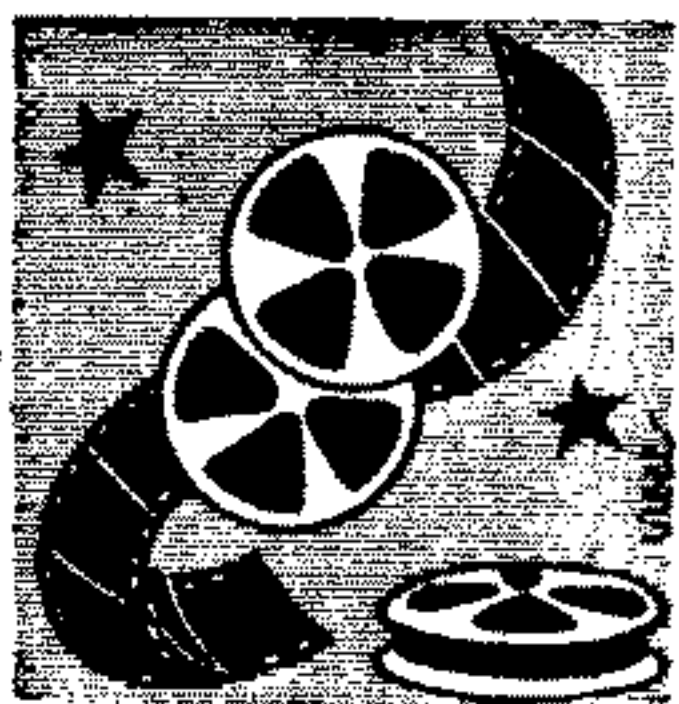


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Brando on the Waterfront

LET ME say right off that "On the Waterfront" (Columbia) is one of the most exciting films ever made in the United States. Later on I will qualify that statement, but I want to report at the outset that there is a tremendous picture around, a film absolutely explosive in its impact on the emotions and on the motion picture as a form.

In the past several years there have been two things happening in the movies. On the one hand, Hollywood has been developing its capacity to bedazzle. The new aspect ratios and the ultimate-weapon budgets are the latest means by which the Technicolor Tintoretos have turned film into the mightiest canvas the world has ever seen. At the same time, a number of earnest toilers in the business have been aware that the Europeans made us look like popcorn peddlers when it came to showing life problems of working-class persons in their own homes and on their own streets. The other half of the Hollywood story has been a conscious effort to make contact with the living plainness of the European film image. That effort was a vain one—until now. No matter how many camera crews were sent on location to Brooklyn or New York's East Side, there was usually a synthetic flavor to the material, principally because such settings were used for manufactured stories in which violence was a major titillation.

Now Elia Kazan has moved his cameras onto the Hoboken docks and has broken through the subtle filter which has previously shielded American lenses from the harsh light of reality. And if "On the Waterfront" were not an event for this reason, it would be one because of the performance of Marlon Brando, one of the finest things any man has done on the screen.

"Waterfront" is the story of an ex-prizefighter who is the errand boy for a crooked labor leader. Johnny Friendly, union boss, has turned the docks into his personal fief, the long-shoremen into his serfs. He clips their pay envelopes, lends them money at Shylock rates, orders them out on flash strikes when he sees the chance to shake down a shipper with a dockful of perishable fruit, brutally snuffs out the life of anyone who plays stool pigeon for the crime commission investigating conditions on the water-

front. The background facts for Budd Schulberg's screenplay were supplied by Malcolm Johnson's prize-winning articles, and the film documents a story of peonage enforced by thugs with the acquiescence of the shippers.

In the midst of these assassins, Terry, the prizefighter, is little more than a mascot, tolerated because his educated brother is counsel for the union boss. Brando's performance in this role is a piece of genuine artistry. With half-sentences finished by body shrugs and fish gestures of the hands, with a drawn-brow groping for words, with a street arab's laugh or quick insult, with an ex-athlete's bounce to his walk, Brando projects a wonderfully absorbing portrait of a semi-

stupid, stubborn, inner-sweet young man.

Terry is not particularly troubled by his role as coffee-runner and messenger boy for the mob until one of his errands helps set up the sudden death of a neighborhood pigeon fancier who had given a statement to the crime commission. The murder becomes the occasion for the formation of a rump organization spearheaded by a militant priest and the sister of the murdered boy. The prizefighter meets the sister, takes her to a saloon, buys the parochial schoolgirl her first glass of beer, and falls in love with her in a scene that is inexpressibly sweet.

The fighter is subpoenaed by the crime commission. Johnny Friendly sends the lawyer brother to stop his mouth. The brothers have an unforgettable scene as they ride together in a taxi toward the execution headquarters. "It was you made me a bum, Charlie," says the prizefighter, and Brando's reading of this line is match-



—From "On the Waterfront."

Marlon Brando—"one of the finest things any man has done on the screen."