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America on Parade

On The Waterfront
Directed by Elia Kazan
Columbia Picture
1954; 108 minutes

Cast

Terry Malloy	Marlon Brando*
Father Barry	Karl Malden
Johnny Friendly	Lee J. Cobb
Charles Malloy	Rod Steiger
Edie Doyle	Eva Marie Saint*
Pop Doyle	John Hamilton
Kayo Dugan	Pat Henning
Big Mac	James Westerfield

Credits

Producer	Sam Spiegel*
Director	Elia Kazan*
Screenplay	Budd Schulberg*
Based on Articles by	Malcolm Johnson
Musical Score	Leonard Bernstein
Art Direction	Richard Day*
Cinematographer	Boris Kaufman*
Editor	Gene Milford*

*Academy Awards

Notes

In the introduction to his book Working Studs Terkel writes: "This book, being about work, is, by very nature, about violence -- to the spirit as well as to the body ... it is, above all, about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us." One might think that Terkel is describing On The Waterfront, for this exceptional film is the best document about the lack of dignity in meaningless labor, and the plight of the working man who is abused and exploited, in this case by the mob in the guise of a trade union.

But there is a second theme that is also meaningfully explored: should a person be an informer? This theme may have been even closer to director Elia Kazan's purpose. In 1951, he drew great criticism from the film community when he testified as a friendly witness before the House Un-American Activities Committee (as did writer Budd Schulberg and actor Lee J. Cobb). In 1954, these three involved themselves in this film that explores informing as a noble act.

Whatever his reasons, Elia Kazan has created the strongest American film concerned with social issues. Though highly melodramatic, especially at its climax, it is a powerful viewing experience, made great as all films of excellence are by the contributions of many talents. Though Leonard Bernstein's music is occasionally overpowering, and seems in some movements like a warmup for West Side Story, his score captures and runs parallel to the fog laments of the docks. The film also freezes time, place and mood perfectly in the expert photography of Boris Kaufman that captures the poetic ugliness of the inner city, with its empty roofs riddled with TV antennas, its steaming trash cans, its people huddled close to walls with chins tucked into chests, all symbolizing the emptiness and long winters of fruitless lives.

On The Waterfront is ultimately concerned about the problems of people, and the toughness of life lived at the bottom. To make this come alive, Kazan assembled an excellent cast from his New York based Actors Studio, and they responded with some of the best acting in American films. When combined with Schulberg's lean, hard script, the film contains individual scenes that are considered classics. The scene in the bar, when Terry opens up to Edie about his early life, is an example of Marlon Brando at his best, suggesting the tortured past that is constantly confronting him. The confession scene between Terry and Edie, when he discloses his indirect role in her brother's death is a live scene of enormous power. Father Barry's Sermon in the Hold, full of modern Christianity, is made all the more poignant by the uncompromising toughness of Karl Malden. Most of all is the taxi cab scene, perhaps the most famous sequence in American films, when Terry finally articulates to his brother Charley his confused thoughts, terrible hurts, and shattered dreams of a life of some dignity. It is a sequence made great because of the truthfulness of the scene and the conviction of the performers.

In spite of Stanley Kowalski and Don Corleone, this is Brando's best role and performance. He is the most expressive actor in America, not with words but with gestures. His body actions and movements upon discovering the dead pigeons on the roof summarize pages of dialogue. He has often been great, but his rendering of Terry Malloy is his finest achievement.

Notes by Christopher J. Warren



Wadsworth Atheneum

The American Cinema: A Survey 1896-1976

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