

## On the Waterfront

By Robert Sklar

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More than most movies, "On the Waterfront" carries the almost unbearable weight of its era's struggles and the personal histories of its makers. The 1954 Academy Award best picture has had as many detractors as admirers over the years. Someday the film may be appreciated apart from painful memories and bitter recriminations, but the moment has not yet arrived.

The film clearly offers a great deal to appreciate. Its expose of the gangster-ridden longshoremen's unions on the New York-New Jersey docks was a rare instance of social problem cinema in a safe, conformist decade. With performers trained in the intense, psychologically based style of New York's Actors Studio, it stands as perhaps the single most powerful expression of ensemble Method acting in Hollywood movies. And it's a striking example of motion picture artistry achieved through the collaborative talents of many hands.

Hollywood immediately recognized all these attributes. The movie community gave "" an unprecedented twelve Academy Award nominations and voted the film eight Oscars. Elia Kazan won a best director, Marlon Brando as best actor, and Eva Marie Saint as best supporting actress. Budd Schulberg took the award for his story and screenplay, and additional Oscars were claimed for cinematography, art direction, and editing. The non-winning nominees were just as distinguished – Leonard Bernstein for musical score and remarkable trio of players nominated in the supporting actor category, Lee J. Cobb, Karl Malden, and Rod Steiger.

But nearly everyone recognized at the time that these awards were political as well as artistic. Hollywood had been suffering the traumas caused by years of hearings by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) investigating "communist infiltration" of the movie industry. Witnesses had been forced to "name names" – to inform on others – or face blacklisting. Informers save their careers but lost lifelong friendships, even marriages. The hearings were a humiliating charade, since HUAC and the FBI already knew every name the informers gave up.

Then came "On the Waterfront," with its bold assertion that information was an act of moral heroism. When he



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finally agrees to testify against corrupt union boss Johnny Friendly, Brando's character Terry Malloy can feel that he is no ratfink squealer but a vital cog in the defense of democracy against tyranny. By cheering "On the Waterfront" Hollywood persuaded itself for a brief moment that the destructive debacle of the hearings marked a triumph of patriotic service.

Few were unaware of what was also personally at stake in the film. Director Kazan, son of Greek immigrants, had testified before HUAC and named names. So too had screenwriter Schulberg, son of one of early Hollywood's Jewish moguls. A third informer among the film's principals was the actor who played Johnny Friendly, Lee J. Cobb.

Cobb later regretted his testimony, saying he gave in because he was ill and broke. But Schulberg and Kazan have never wavered in defending their stance. In his 1988 autobiography, "Elia Kazan: A Life," the director wrote, "When Brando, at the end, yells at Lee Cobb,

the mob boss, 'I'm glad what I done – you hear me? – glad what I done!' that was me saying, with identical heat, that I was glad I had testified as I had."

Development on a waterfront film began long before it turned into a justification for HUAC informers. The original collaboration was between Kazan and playwright Arthur Miller, who wrote a screenplay, *The Hook*, based on the murder of union reformer on Brooklyn's Red Hook docks. The Columbia studio was interested in the project but, in the early 1950s political climate, wanted a stronger anticommunist slant. Miller withdrew his script; Kazan later felt that his HUAC subpoena may have come as retaliation. Their friendship ended for a decade. (When Miller was called to testify in 1956 he refused to inform on others and was cited for contempt of Congress, but he got off with a small fine and a suspended sentence.)

Schulberg had also been working on a script based on a series of newspaper articles on waterfront corruption. After he and Kazan had gone through their HUAC ordeals, the two men got together. Walking the docks for further research, Schulberg discovered a "waterfront priest" who became the character of Father Barry (portrayed by Karl Malden) and gave the narrative its aura of religious redemption and righteousness. Producer Sam Spiegel backed the project. Brando joined in, and "On the Waterfront" was on the way to its ambiguous place in movie history.

While it's impossible to separate the film from its own conflicted past, "On the Waterfront" still provides many cinematic pleasures. The three least well known of the Oscar winners made indispensable contributions. Art Director Richard Day created the atmosphere of the docks and their working-class urban neighborhoods with evocative realism. Boris Kaufman, a Russian Jewish émigré and young brother of famed Soviet documentarian Dziga Vertov (whose original name was Denis Kaufman), photographed these settings in a stark black-and-white deep-focus cinematography. Editor Gene Milford shaped a classic mix of close-ups and long shots.

Above all the film is a triumph of performance. Few scenes in American film history are more famous than the sequence in the back of a taxi with Brando's Terry and Rod Steiger as his older brother Charlie. Charlie, who works for the corrupt union, has been sent to dissuade Terry from informing. During their conversation Terry, a former boxer, realizes that Charlie had made him throw a fight that destroyed his career. "I could've

been a contender." Terry cries in anguish. He rejects the demand, an act that leads directly to Charlie's murder by the mob. This cruel retribution cancels out the brothers' mutual betrayals and turns Terry's informing into an act of private revenge as much as of civic duty.

Critics continue to debate whether "On the Waterfront" conveys democratic values or an image of dockworkers who are passive followers of whoever leads them – the tyrannical boss or the informer. Is it a true expose or one that leaves the actual holders of corrupt power (briefly glimpsed in a quick shot of "Mr. Upstairs" during Terry's testimony) untouched? If nothing else, "On the Waterfront" is a monument to the artistic aspirations and the political compromises of its time.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*The late Robert Sklar was a member of the National Film Preservation Board as well as a film scholar and author of the 1975 book "Movie-Made America."*