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On the Waterfront (A)

Director: **Elia Kazan**
USA 1954

Running time: 108 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Marlon Brando** (Terry Malloy), **Karl Malden** (Father Barry), **Lee J. Cobb** (Johnny Friendly), **Rod Steiger** (Charley Malloy), **Eva Marie Saint** (Edie Doyle).

SCRIPT: **Budd Schulberg**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Boris Kaufman**. EDITING: **Gene Milford**. MUSIC: **Leonard Bernstein**.

On the Waterfront is sixty years old this year, and remains one of those American movies dealing with injustice (Arthur Penn's *The Chase* is another, and *12 Years a Slave* would like to be one) that continue to pack a powerful emotional punch decades later. Perhaps it is because American resources, scale and storytelling are such effective tools in generic film-making, that when harnessed to serious drama they apply an additional stamp of conviction.

It was not the first film made on location in New York City, but it was part of a new brand of cinema, such as *Marty*, with Ernest Borgnine, Fred Zinnemann's *The Men*, also with Brando, and much of the cinema of Samuel Fuller, that favoured gritty subjects and America's working poor.

On the Waterfront is also infamous for being, as received wisdom commonly has it, the film that Elia Kazan used to justify his own testimony before the HUAC: in telling the story of a thug who makes good by coming clean and 'turning stooley', the director effectively says: 'Yes, I was a member of the Communist Party, but I know better now.' His detractors, Arthur Miller among them, did not lose time in pointing out the gap between corrupt union extortion of longshoremen and the spurious guilt of the names he named for McCarthy's kangaroo court. Such is the alchemy of art.

Playwright Arthur Miller had in fact been responsible for the first draft of a script that was to become *On the Waterfront*, but it was Budd Schulberg who apparently heard the story from the mouth of actual longshoreman, Anthony DiVincenzo, and himself finished the script. Schulberg was also a witness before the HUAC.

Most of us, however, are content to take the film on its own undeniable merits. Brando gives us

one of his most nuanced performances so far, and his scenes with Saint pack a powerful emotional punch, literalised in the scene when he beats down her apartment door. Malden is also outstanding, speaking out against violence from the hold of a ship where murder has just been meted out, or lighting his cigarette with a shaking hand moments after Terry has told Edie about his part in her brother's death. Cobb and Steiger deliver more familiar portrayals of off-the-peg venality, but both were starting out on their film careers and made a significant splash with this movie, garnering Oscar nominations for Best Supporting Actor.

Few will leave the cinema without carrying home the strains of Leonard Bernstein's magnificent score in their ears. Sandwiched between *On the Town* and *West Side Story*, both based on stage shows and also New York-set, this was to be Lenny's only 'for the screen' project, and indeed it was one in which he fully invested his energies. There was a great deal of music written, more than survives, the producers feeling that the neo-realist flavour of the drama would be compromised by an overly operatic approach. What is left the composer later reworked into a continuous concert suite, and the images of the film leap out at you as you listen. Whether the noble, yet irredeemably earthbound, horn theme that opens the picture, or the love theme derived from it, which reaches yearningly for the skies, or the typically vigorous rhythmic sections that accompany moments of danger, the results are unquestionably amongst the greatest music ever written for a film.

David Clare