

USA, 1954. PG. 108 min

**Cast:** Marlon Brandon, Karl Malden, Lee J. Cobb, Rod Steiger; **Writers:** Malcolm Johnson, Budd Schulberg; **Music:** Leonard Bernstein; **Cinematographer:** Boris Kaufman; **Producer:** Sam Spiegel; **Director:** Elia Kazan

In 1952, two years before the release of *On the Waterfront*, director Elia Kazan had finally agreed - after initially refusing - to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee. He identified eight fellow members of a communist organization to which he had briefly belonged in the 1930s, and relegated them to the Hollywood blacklist. In doing so he accomplished at least two things: he salvaged his own film and theater career, and he effectively ended theirs; one of those identified, actress Phoebe Brand, would not have a film role for 40 years. To most of the Hollywood community, Kazan's decision was inexcusable. But what has done the most lasting damage to his reputation is not necessarily the ruin he brought to the careers of playwright Clifford Odets (a longtime friend of his) or Paula Strasberg (wife of acting guru Lee Strasberg, another friend), though such personal betrayals are galling to many. Rather, Kazan's detractors have been most incensed by his persistent lack of regret. Where many who testified before the committee later expressed disgust with themselves at having named names, Kazan has always stood by his decision, characterizing it not as a calculated act of self-preservation, but as a courageous stand against a dangerous political ideology he had come to despise.

Given Kazan's claims of a political change of heart, he could scarcely have failed to realize how perfectly *On the Waterfront* functions as an allegory for his own struggles. The film's hero, Terry Malloy (Brando), is a washed-up boxer working on the New York docks, run by

corrupt union boss Johnny Friendly (Cobb). As brother to Friendly's right-hand man, Charley (Steiger), Terry is largely sheltered from, and ignorant of, the harsher realities of life under the mob boss - those who displease Friendly are soon unable to find work; those who betray him by cooperating with investigators may find themselves flung from a rooftop. It is the demise of one such potential informer, Joey, that leads Terry to a truer understanding of the nature of Friendly's brand of violent manipulation. Eventually, Terry comes to understand that his silence is tantamount to complicity, and he asks himself what should command more loyalty: one's personal sense of goodness and decency, or a corrupt organization that demands silence in the face of its crimes?



Kazan, like Terry, chose the former. Unlike Terry, Kazan has never been transformed in the eyes of many of his colleagues from rat to hero. But being ostracized from a large portion of the Hollywood community, though undoubtedly painful, was nonetheless the conflict that spurred Kazan to create his best and in some ways most atypical film. Though revered as an actors' director and a master craftsman, his work has sometimes been dismissed as artistically timid, and for all the consistent quality of his films, he took few chances with style, technique or subject matter. Indeed, even Kazan makes this point. Drawing a comparison between himself and his friend director Nicholas Ray, whose tumultuous career produced some of the more lurid and subtextual studio

pictures of the 1950s, Kazan wrote in his 1988 memoir, "We'd both started as actors and become directors. But he went 'all the way,' and I did not. I was more disciplined, more in control, more cautious, more bourgeois. Perhaps, I thought, he's been more of an artist, more of a gambler."

Though hardly radical, *On the Waterfront* is certainly Kazan's most impassioned film. Where even the most emotional subject matter can, in Kazan's hands, at times feel like a cold exercise in Freudian intellectualizing (like his adaptation of *East of Eden*, for example), or an overwrought contrivance (like the self-conscious *Baby Doll*). *On the Waterfront* is the ultimate convergence of all the director's most closely held personal and artistic principles. His artistic trademarks - gritty location work, intense method acting, tightly written characters, and narrative economy - are here in service to the very themes and issues that changed Kazan's life and career forever, and they are all the more powerful for it.

It's been more than 50 years since Kazan gave his testimony, but he remains a controversial figure. When in 1999 it was announced he would receive an Oscar for lifetime achievement, many in the industry were outraged, and a large portion of the audience refused to stand or applaud when the presentation was made. Brand herself spoke out, saying, "I forgive. I forgive a lot. But I don't think I can forgive Kazan." Indeed, one can argue with his politics, one can question his motives, but *On the Waterfront*, his best and most personal picture, is unassailable.

- Written by Lawrence Fahey