

FILM

On the Waterfront (1954)

Budd Schulberg

ANALYSIS

...One night he surprised her by taking her out to their favorite theater in Beverly Hills to see *On the Waterfront*, a reply from Elia [Kazan] and Budd Schulberg to all those in Hollywood and New York who had reviled and shunned them for cooperating with the Congress.

Schulberg reacted to his disgrace in Hollywood by going to live among longshoremen on the waterfront in New Jersey, where he wrote a screenplay based on a newspaper series about corruption in their union. Then he teamed up with Kazan. They were rejected by Zanuck at Fox and by other studios, then finally sold their picture to an independent producer. Marlon Brando plays the hero used by his crooked brother, played by Rod Steiger, whose murder moves Brando to testify before the Crime Commission. Breaking the code of children and criminals, Brando redeems himself by informing on the gangsters who run his union and is beaten almost to death for it by the mob. During the movie, some blowfish in the audience booed, especially at the end when the credits rolled.

Although they had learned a lot about acting from Kazan, both Brando and Steiger scorned him for informing on Communists to the House Committee. Despite that, they put their careers above their principles by acting for him again in *On the Waterfront*. Neither of them realized they were performing an allegory contrary to their own politics and few others in Hollywood were any more perceptive, apparently, because the movie won seven Oscars including Best Picture. Brando was awarded one and Steiger got nominated. Yet as soon as they were informed, the two Method actors expressed dismay at being duped and used and returned to a posture of bitter contempt for Kazan. Many other leftists wanted to revoke the awards. Ryan [Eisley] wired congratulations to Budd and to Elia. To Brando and Steiger he sent telegrams informing them that they had been voted the most inflated blowfish of the year.

Sarah laughed with him about it. Unfortunately for the Eisleys, however, the achievement of Schulberg and Kazan did not inspire a sudden respect for truth among movieheads, nor deter the Communists and their liberal collaborators from taking revenge against perceived enemies. The leftists saved face through a recycling of old illusions in the most influential work ever produced by Hollywood, the Blacklist myth. Method politics.

COMMUNISTS IN HOLLYWOOD

The Hollywood Ten, seen as traitors and fascist jerks by most Americans, were recast as innocent liberals. They were hyped to appear as nothing more than artists persecuted by witch hunters. Advocates of totalitarianism became heroes of free speech. The first of the Ten's commandments was, Thou shalt no longer call a Communist a Communist, on the rationalization that to describe him accurately would be to further persecute him. Journalists and historians and educators cooperated, protecting free speech by refusing to identify its enemies. The history of Communism in Hollywood was simply erased, the way purged officials were airbrushed out of photographs in the Soviet Union. Far from being purged, the movietown disciples of Stalin rose so far above the status they ever would have enjoyed without their ineffectual blacklisting by the studios, they were anointed saints in a religion of victims, with martyrs and demons and the Devil Joe McCarthy. Anyone who could plausibly claim to have been touched by the Blacklist was redeemed from treason, stupidity, alcoholism, failure, hair loss or suicide. They could save themselves from media vampires simply by holding up a double cross. For many, a little oppression balm in Hollywood.

Of about two hundred Communists who had their movie careers interrupted or otherwise adversely affected by the Blacklist, some returned to Broadway, some got work in Europe, others went into journalism, education and publishing. Lester Cole wrote film criticism for Communist Party publications,

John Howard Lawson became a professor and Lionel Stander a broker on Wall Street. The wealthy Communists, such as Hellman and Trumbo, got richer. Later accounts of Communism in Hollywood, in many books and movies, were written mainly by the Communists themselves. What for most of them was a temporary inconvenience and career opportunity was called a “cultural holocaust,” blamed entirely on “McCarthyism” and inflated until it seemed that the Ten were the Hollywood Ten Thousand, a myth that puffed up like a gigantic blowfish, so insistent and imposing it became the very persona of Hollywood, afloat in fantasy, pretentious and poisonous, hissing with a fish-eyed look of righteous martyrdom, an avenger more bristly than Godzilla, but larger, bigger than a blimp and growing larger year by year, intimidating by inflation, given substance by projection and monopolizing space, so immense it knocked down the House Committee and patriotism and truth and justice and every obstacle in its path, swelling so large, stretching so far beyond the limits of credulity that observers wondered when it would explode or be harpooned by Joe McCarthy.

The logical choice for the role of the Devil would have been Parnell Thomas, Chairman of the House Committee during its first round of hearings, since Joe McCarthy never had anything to do with Hollywood and did not even begin to investigate Communists until over a decade after the Committee, under Democrats, began to investigate the movie industry, but Thomas got convicted of embezzlement and was imprisoned in the same facility with two of the Ten he had sent there, casting him instead as the Hypocritical Rightwing Laughingstock. The role went to the U.S. Senator from Wisconsin because liberals thought he actually was the Devil. A few years before, the Democratic Secretary of State had admitted that over two hundred identified security risks at the State Department were still employed. McCarthy tried to find out if they were still there. He had to become aggressive to be heard over all the blowfish who tried to drown him out and scare him away. His targets were bureaucrats, government employees responsible for removing from sensitive jobs security risks like the spy Julius Rosenberg--Soviet code name “Liberal”--before they turned over more secrets to the Soviets, having already subjected Americans to the ongoing terror of annihilation by nuclear weapons.

A few weeks before McCarthy challenged the State Department, a top official of the agency named Alger Hiss had been convicted of perjury for denying he was a Soviet spy, based on the testimony of confessed spy Whittaker Chambers, a former State Department official who also named two dozen other Soviet spies working for the Roosevelt administration. Hiss had been the President’s advisor at Yalta, where the dying Roosevelt gave Eastern Europe to Stalin. Hiss was not charged with espionage only because the statute of limitations had expired, yet he was defended by the brightest stars of the liberal establishment--President Truman, Eleanor Roosevelt, Adlai Stevenson, two Supreme Court justices and other leaders who were apparently just as cozy with Communists as the movie stars. Blowfish embarrassment increassssssed with another Hisssssssss, Alger's brother Donald Hiss, also a Soviet spy working in the administration. Hissing leaks were popping out all over the gigantic blowfish, as well as the government, as it puffed up ever larger trying to blow off McCarthy. The elite media quickly moved in to protect free speech by covering up and patching over the holes in the blowfish. The entire East Coast liberal aristocracy joined forces with Hollywood in denial, scoffing at the evidence, putting on expressions of righteous martyrdom, swelling with indignation as they defended their friends the Communist spies, inflating the humongous blowfish to a magnitude that cast a shadow over all America, the darkness they called “McCarthyism.”

Joe McCarthy was the little guy the blowfish claimed to be protecting, a veteran who had fought real enemies during the war in the Pacific. He was a common man loathed by the elites, but loved by working class Americans. He sustained approval ratings of over fifty percent throughout the most intense blitzkrieg of vilification, defamation, hatred and harassment ever unleashed upon an American. Culpable liberals tried to vindicate their party by slandering McCarthy, shifting the spotlight away from themselves for once, turning Joe into a scapegoat, into a Hitler imposing a reign of terror! The blowfish got so frightened by accountability, they have been all puffed up about it ever since. In a now legendary, even scriptural television special attacking McCarthy, with his deep Godlike voice, the deified broadcaster Edward R. Murrow, a friend of Soviet spy Laurence Duggan, did not report pertinent facts in context and edited footage to falsify situations and make Joe look as bad as possible. Among other discoveries, McCarthy found a Communist Party member employed in the Code Room of the Pentagon. The most condemned activity in the Blacklist myth, naming names in public, was forced upon him by a vote of Senate

Democrats. McCarthy did not want to name people, except in closed session, until further investigations were completed.

Sarah thought “McCarthyism” was the natural reaction by a majority of Americans to those in power who were befriending and employing dozens, perhaps hundreds, of Soviet agents at the highest levels of government, especially if they went to Harvard. Ryan hated McCarthy so much that Sarah never pointed out to him that the Senator was right, so far as she knew, about every spy and security risk he was forced to name. She no longer spoke to Ryan about politics. The media scapegoating of McCarthy succeeded so well that he was censured by the Senate for embarrassing the blowfish. Joe withstood the heat for just three years before he succumbed to the consolation of alcohol and died at age forty-eight. It troubled Sarah, whenever she talked on the phone to her informer at Fox, that the most demonized person in American history was not a traitor, but an investigator who exposed traitors....

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