

FILM

Billy Budd (1962) by Peter Ustinov

ANALYSIS

from *Hollyworld* (2006)

...She entered the large sloping classroom, filling with over two hundred students, and took a seat down in the middle. *Billy Budd* was a recent British adaptation of Herman Melville's tragedy, directed and co-written by Peter Ustinov, with Robert Rossen and DeWitt Bodeen. Robert Rossen was a former Red who had been subpoenaed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities and refused to inform. He later rejected the Party and eventually informed on over fifty Communists. After it came out, Sarah thought this film exposed the intellectual limitations of American movie critics such as Leslie Halliwell, to her mind a subjective boob with no literary education.

Billy Budd is a young sailor drafted into the British Navy during a war with France in 1797, from The Rights of Man to a warship named the Avenger, losing his peacetime civil rights. He is falsely accused of mutiny by Claggart, the malicious Master-at-Arms. Billy is a performer, the handsome sailor, as beloved and legendary as a movie star, but as naive as a baby. Captain Vere loves him like a son and urges him to defend himself against Claggart's accusation, but Billy's innocence is evoked by a stutter that prevents him from speaking up. In frustration, he strikes out with a blow that knocks down his accuser, who bumps his head and dies. At his court martial, Billy refuses to inform on his shipmates, who *are* in fact plotting a mutiny, as is made evident throughout. As a necessity to preserve order at a time when the enemy may be encountered at any moment, Captain Starry Vere must veer from his desire and do his duty, serving a transcendent starry truth by hanging Billy to maintain order in accordance with the law--the Code, analogous to the movie industry Production Code and the U.S. Constitution.

By analogy, the film casts the Hollywood Communists and their many liberal sympathizers as mutineers and a serious threat in time of war. Like Rossen and many others were in movietown, Billy is loyal to his shipmates and too naive to inform. Hence, he is necessarily condemned by the Captain, or studio head, to "hang"--by analogy, to be blacklisted. Ironically, the sacrifice of an often innocent individual to the collective welfare has always been a basic tenet and practice of Communists.

During the showing of the film, a few students in the back raised their fingers in the peace sign high enough to enter the projection beam and cast bunny ear shadows at the bottom of the picture. The audible responses from the audience all sided with Billy as a victim of the draft, to such an extent that whenever Captain Vere began to speak, especially when he had to argue that Billy must hang, he provoked boos and catcalls.

"Shut up! We can't hear!" one student yelled.

By the end, Sarah thought Ustinov and his colleagues had produced the most ambitious response to the House Committee hearings since *On the Waterfront* by Budd Schulberg and Elia Kazan. Rossen no longer worked in Hollywood and apparently had repudiated its prevailing myth of the Blacklist. However, the film does express some of those continuing attitudes, most obviously in the absurd exaggeration of the punishment suffered by the uncooperative Communists, who were merely blacklisted temporarily, not executed. The exaggeration is even more extreme insofar as Billy is seen as an "innocent" liberal, since no culpable liberals were even blacklisted, they were merely disgraced outside of Hollywood.

Also, Claggart as the spy hunter McCarthy is portrayed as a liar and a brutal sadist who *incites* the mutiny--his "shadow" lengthens on the ship--although the real McCarthy did not even appear on the scene until after the Blacklist began and never had anything to do with Hollywood. The only spy in the film is Squeak the informer who works for the McCarthy figure, a cowardly weasel and a liar who gets innocent people in trouble, the view taken by Communists and collaborating liberals toward those in Hollywood

such as Elia Kazan and Budd Schulberg who cooperated with the Congress. As the ship's pilot, like a studio head, Vere is cast by circumstance in the role of a Pilate. Billy as the liberal who refuses to inform is self-sacrificial, noble and a "peacemaker" crucified like Christ, essentially good and innocent, unjustly punished like the accused in Arthur Miller's highly regarded Communist propaganda *The Crucible*, whose liberal hero likewise is compared to Christ.

Those versions of events in Hollywood disappointed Sarah as dishonest. They reminded her of Lillian Hellman portraying herself as Joan of Arc. There were some naive people involved, but they were not innocent Billy Budds. The closest might be Billy Budd Schulberg, who grew into a Vere. She did give Ustinov credit for understanding *Billy Budd* at the deepest level, however. The story appears to be a conflict between obvious Good and Evil, making Billy and Claggart pure inhuman symbols, as they are at the superficial level of propaganda. Melville suggests, however, that the innocent in everyone *must* die in order to survive in a hostile world, making the story an allegory of maturation, in which the child within and the calculating selfish ego are both transcended by a synthesis, the tragic vision of Captain Vere. The film conveys this complexity by having Claggart ask Squeak in reference to Billy, "Which of us is Satan?"

The class took a break.

A graduate student came in to lead the discussion. When they resumed, most students responded to the picture as an antiwar film opposing the draft, which was apparently why the professor selected it for the course, but homosexuality soon became the focus. Melville hints at a homosexual tension that accounts for the psychology of Claggart at the literal level, explaining his unusual interest in Billy, a suspicion also leveled at McCarthy, but the film excludes any such hint. Here at Berkeley, homosexuality was a cause. One of the students who sounded like they had not read the novella argued that Vere orders Billy into his quarters to have sex and that Claggart is jealous. Another cited a quotation from *Moby-Dick* as evidence that Melville was gay, in the chapter full of puns about squeezing sperm. Sarah had always seen that passage as evidence that Melville saw the common temporary bisexuality of sailors at sea as harmless, that he advocated tolerance while affirming traditional marriage.

"They hang him because he's gay!"

"But Vere is the only one who argues for that," said a girl.

"Vere hates himself!" the young man declared.

"He's repressed and homophobic!" said another student. "That's why the French ship is going to win!"

"It shows we should have more gays in the military."

"Naw, the military *sucks*, man."

As she thought more about it, Sarah admired the film for being remarkably faithful to the original story. Objective scholarship in adaptation was less rare in Britain than in the United States. She also appreciated the point that the crew depicted as mutineers--Communists or liberal sympathizers--were still there in Hollywood. Included in the crew, for example, was Melvyn Douglas, husband of one of the few members of the U.S. House who supported the Communists in the landslide vote to cite them for contempt of Congress for their behavior in refusing to answer questions in response to subpoenas. At the same time, by assenting to the original story, Sarah felt almost duped into accepting the parallels to Hollywood history that in many ways did not match the facts. Then she realized that Ustinov and his colleagues were able to use Melville's story to dramatize the way that culpable liberals were claiming innocence in the Blacklist scandal, in effect comparing themselves to poor Billy.

Demonizing the McCarthy figure and blaming him for all the troubles made it easy for the liberals to overlook that Billy is guilty. As Ustinov understands, however, when he refuses to inform, Billy becomes an accomplice to the mutiny. Billy the liberal also kills the Master-at-Arms, a reference to the censure and death of Senator McCarthy a few years before the film was made. The suffering of Vere after Billy is hung

may express the feelings of Robert Rossen and Melvyn Douglas. Ustinov showed integrity by not falsifying Melville, and for that, Sarah felt grateful to him. Besides, she thought, the liberal myth would not be noticed by many viewers--mainly Hollywood insiders--and its import would be forgotten long before *Billy Budd*....

Michael Hollister
from Chapter 11
Hollywood (2006)

