

JOANNA E. RAPF

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## Introduction: “The Mysterious Way of Art”

### Making a Difference in *On the Waterfront*

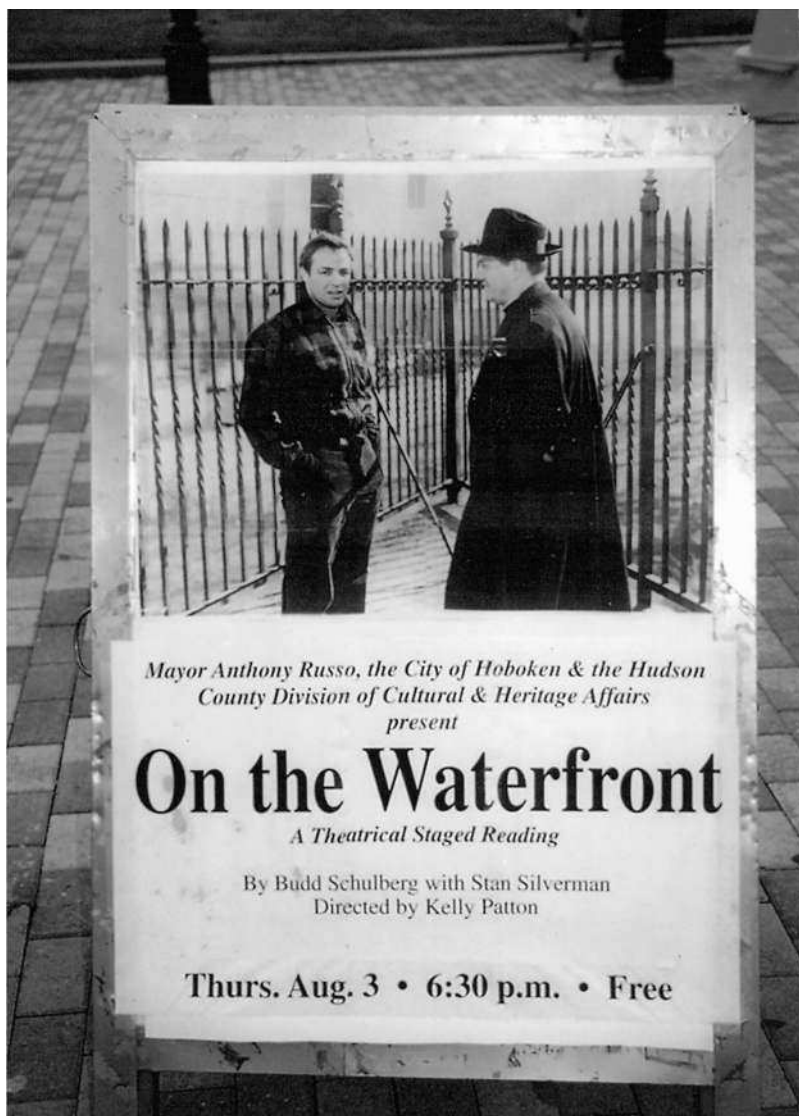
On August 3, 2000, at the Frank Sinatra Amphitheater on the Hoboken waterfront where *On the Waterfront* was shot, screenwriter Budd Schulberg was honored for his work on that film and for his contributions to the cultural life of this now beautiful and thriving community. A plaque has been placed where the piers once stood, marking the location of the filming of this landmark motion picture. With the gray light over the New York skyline as a backdrop, the play, *On the Waterfront*, adapted by Budd Schulberg and Stan Silverman from the film and novel, was given a staged reading to a largely local audience that included some people who had been on hand almost fifty years ago when cast and crew endured cold weather and a hostile waterfront environment to create the work that is the subject of this book.

*On the Waterfront* won eight Academy Awards in the spring of 1955 (it was nominated for eleven): Best Picture, Screenplay, Direction, Cinematography, Editing, Art Direction, Actor (Marlon Brando), and Supporting Actress (Eva Marie Saint). One of the awards it did *not* receive was for Leonard Bernstein’s remarkable score, as Jon Burlingame discusses in his essay in this volume. Both Kazan and Schulberg have expressed some reservations about the music. “It put the picture on the level of almost operatic melodrama here and there. That’s the only thing I object to” (Young 183).\*

\* References cited may be found in the section Selected Critical Bibliography at the end of this book.

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1A. The Advertisement for the Theatrical Staged Reading of *On the Waterfront* in Hoboken, New Jersey, Thursday, August 3, 2000.

The film is number eight on the American Film Institute's greatest 100 American films of the 20th century, and even people who have not seen it recognize such lines as "I coulda been a contender." Many reviews at the time it opened [some included in this volume]



**1B.** Budd Schulberg speaking at the event. (Courtesy of Joanna E. Rapf)

recognized its greatness. *The Saturday Review* began quite simply: “Let me say right off that *On the Waterfront* (Columbia) is one of the most exciting films ever made in the United States” (25). The *New Yorker* described it as “galvanic” (52), while *Newsweek* got to the heart of its intensity as “a story of violence, of the hand and of the heart, that moves with the uncomfortable beat of a rising pulse. It is melodrama that transcends itself, its violence set off against striking depictions of love, corporal and spiritual” (78).

Although the auteur theory has led to the unfortunate habit of talking about a movie in terms of its director, this *Handbook* will stress the fact that making motion pictures is a collaborative art. *On the Waterfront* is a film that beautifully illustrates not only the importance of direction, but of script, cinematography, acting, art direction, editing, sound, music, and of that intangible, essential quality behind all great films: having something to say.

In putting this book together, I have been inspired not only by the brilliant collaboration that produced an undisputedly great film, but also by the fact that the screenwriter of this film is still a fervent fighter for social causes, including recognition of the writer who is too often hidden as only a name on a rolling list of credits

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where the director takes the possessive. My personal connection is reflected in this book's dedication to Budd Schulberg and to my father, Maurice Rapf, his best friend and Emeritus Director of Film Studies at Dartmouth College. Budd and Maurice grew up together in Hollywood during the 1920s as studio brats, one the son of Paramount executive and producer, B. P. Schulberg, and the other the son of MGM vice-president and producer, Harry Rapf. The bosses' sons were inseparable. With the studios as their playground, they had access to costumes, sets, and a world of make-believe that was the stuff of dreams. They raised racing pigeons together (a hobby later incorporated into *On the Waterfront*), and as young men began a lifelong enthusiasm for sports, especially the opportunity to wager on college football in the fall. They even ended up at Dartmouth College together, and took a memorable trip to the Soviet Union in 1934. Both became outspoken leftists. After graduation, they began careers as writers, initially sharing the difficulties of working on the script of *Winter Carnival* (1939). In Hollywood, they participated in Marxist study groups, and Budd began the novel that was to become one of the great American books about a movie producer, *What Makes Sammy Run?* (1941). In his testimony to the House Un-American Activities Committee on May 23, 1951, he says his break with the Communist Party was triggered when John Howard Lawson and others associated with the Party in Hollywood told him that he could be released from his weekly assignments only if they approved the plan of the novel and oversaw its writing. This insistent pressure on his freedom as a writer was an anathema.

I decided I would have to get away from this if I was ever to be a writer. I decided to leave the group, cut myself off, pay no more dues, listen to no more advice, indulge in no more political literary discussions, and to go away from the Party, from Hollywood, and try to write a book, which is what I did.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, it was his testimony before the HUAC that also caused a painful break with my father who, although he never testified, was blacklisted and remained a committed leftist. Happily, the two men reunited in the 1960s when their sons enrolled at their alma mater, Dartmouth College, and they renewed a friendship that lasts to this day. Budd, a "liberal anticommunist," and my dad, an "unrepentant

reactionary Communist," show that ultimately labels don't matter. Shared roots, a love of family, over eighty years of memories create a bond of friendship that transcends the vagaries of politics and human frailty.

Although Schulberg became disillusioned with the Communist Party, especially over its treatment of writers in the Soviet Union, he has remained a "leftist," committed to social causes, to making this world a better place, to fighting injustice, bigotry, racial intolerance. Perhaps his greatest legacy, besides his novels and the screenplay for *On the Waterfront*, will be the Watts Writers' Workshop in Los Angeles and the Frederick Douglas Creative Arts Center in New York where disadvantaged young people are supported in their creative work. He truly has changed people's lives and contributed significantly to the social, cultural, and literary wealth of the 20th century.

In the foreword to this *Handbook*, he writes about the importance of films that do not merely entertain, but "seek to stir our social conscience and make a difference." Obviously, *On the Waterfront* is such a film, as all the contributors to this volume agree. However, their perspectives are various, and not all flattering. Scholars, living above the trenches, sometimes have the reputation of being disconnected from the blood and guts of making a film. Schulberg is refreshingly critical of some of the essays in this book, and his perspective allows us to reflect on the difference between the way an author thinks of his work and the way we receive it.

Unlike Schulberg, who came from Hollywood royalty, the other man who might be termed an "author" of *On the Waterfront*, Elia Kazan, was an immigrant's son. He was four when his Greek parents came to this country from Turkey and settled in New York where his father became a successful rug merchant. He tells of this background in *America, America* (1963), based on his own largely autobiographical novel. A year after graduating from Williams College, and a stint at the Yale School of Drama, Kazan joined the Group Theatre in New York which had been founded by Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg, and Cheryl Crawford in 1931 (for the history of Kazan and the Group, see the essay by David Thomson). During the Great Depression the Communist Party was attractive to artists and intellectuals looking for a better world. Kazan became a member in the summer of 1934. For the House Un-American Activities Committee

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in 1952, he explained his reasons this way:

... it seemed to me at that time that the Party had at heart the cause of the poor and unemployed people whom I saw on the streets about me. I felt that by joining, I was going to help them, I was going to fight Hitler, and, strange as it seems today, I felt that I was acting for the good of the American people.

(Bentley 486)

Like Schulberg, Kazan has always had a social conscience. In the early 1930s he had hoped for social revolution and admired Franklin Delano Roosevelt. In hindsight, he now feels progress comes about “through resolution of dissension. When a problem is resolved, there’s a tiny step forward” (Young 177). His disillusionment with the Party came when he was “tried” for refusing to follow orders to instigate a strike in the Group Theatre. Although for many years after he says he still believed in the ideals of Communism, he wanted nothing more to do with American Communists, and he left the Party in the spring of 1936. Then the Stalin – Hitler pact shattered any idealism he had about the USSR.<sup>2</sup>

By 1950, Kazan was probably the most influential stage director in New York, with productions of Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons* in 1947 and *Death of a Salesman* in 1949, and Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947. In 1947 he cofounded the Actors Studio with Lee Strasberg, bringing the Stanislavski-based “Method” to the forefront of American theater. The Method, as Kazan sees it, involves “turning psychology into behavior. . . . You have to show what is being felt through behavior” (Young 150, 161). A number of the actors later to appear in *Waterfront* were students of Kazan’s, including Marlon Brando, Eva Marie Saint, Lee J. Cobb, and Rod Steiger. He was “the white-haired-boy director,” walking Broadway with a swagger, the king of the great white way.<sup>3</sup>

He also had a successful career in films, having directed a sensitive rendition of Betty Smith’s novel, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, in 1945. Three films he did for Darryl F. Zanuck at 20th Century-Fox stand out even today for their courage in dealing with difficult and controversial issues: *Boomerang!* (1947), a look at what happens when a man is unjustly accused of murder; *Gentlemen’s Agreement* (1947), about anti-Semitism; and *Pinky* (1949), about racism. Kazan had a

well-deserved reputation for caring about issues of morality, social justice, responsibility, and conscience. And it is because of this reputation that his cooperation with the House Un-American Activities Committee during its probe into Communist infiltration in the entertainment industry was so surprising to many (see the essays by Neve and Thomson). But he clearly acted out of conscience, a belief – perhaps stronger for his immigrant roots – that he was doing what he should as a “citizen.” He explores these ideas fully in his autobiography, *A Life*.

With both the writer and director of *On the Waterfront* having “named names,” Schulberg in 1951 and Kazan in 1952, it is inevitable that their film has been “read” as a defense of their actions. All the essays in this book touch on this issue in one way or another, but the consensus remains that if you did not know about the personal backgrounds of Schulberg and Kazan, it would be a stretch to see *Waterfront* as a commentary on testimony before the HUAC. As Lance Lee stresses in examination of the screenplay, “it is the work that counts,” comparing *Waterfront*’s greatness as a script to the greatness of Shakespeare’s plays. In both cases, their significance need not have anything to do with the lives of the men who wrote them.

Both Schulberg and Kazan had been working on waterfront stories before they testified, and for Schulberg especially, his focus was clearly on combating corruption on the New York/New Jersey waterfront. Kazan, on the other hand, *has* drawn a parallel between himself and Terry Malloy and the issue of testifying. In his autobiography, *A Life* (1988), he writes quite openly: “*On the Waterfront* was my own story; every day I worked on that film, I was telling the world where I stood and my critics to go and fuck themselves” (529). Yet in spite of this, the primary importance of the film is *not* that it’s a reflection of the political turmoil of postwar America, but that it is, simply, a great film, a work of art. One of the aims of the essays in this volume is to explain why.

If we look at the film’s preproduction history as a road map, there are two distinct paths that converge and lead to the collaboration of Schulberg and Kazan. First there is Malcolm Johnson’s Pulitzer Prize – winning series of articles for the *New York Sun*, “Crime on the Waterfront,” exposing union corruption on the docks of New York. In 1950 the articles appeared as a book and Budd Schulberg was asked

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by fledgling film producer Joseph Curtis, a nephew of Columbia's Harry Cohn, to write a script based on the material. Robert Siodmak tentatively agreed to direct. The resulting script, also called *Crime on the Waterfront*, was finished in the spring of 1951. Schulberg describes doing research for the script in his *New York Times* article, "Waterfront: From Docks to Film," also included in this volume. He writes of hanging out in waterfront bars, drinking with, and gaining the confidence and respect of, the local longshoremen by talking boxing, a sport he loved and knew well (he had not only written a novel about boxing, *The Harder They Fall* (1947), but had comanaged a fighter). He learned first-hand about corrupt unions, run by mob bosses who hobnobbed with New York politicians, about "the shape-up," the bribery, the code of "D 'n D" ("I don't know nuthin', I ain't seen nuthin', I ain't sayin' nuthin'"), the fear, the violence. In cities like Hoboken it was hard to tell where politics ended and the rackets began. It was a system based on a three-way collusion of corrupt unions, the racketeers, and the shipping companies, all greasing the hands of local politicians. And Schulberg met the waterfront priests who championed the rights of the downtrodden longshoremen in whose bars he drank and whose homes he visited. He focuses in particular on Father John Corridan of the lower West Side, who became the model for Father Barry in the film. He describes him this way in the *New York Times* piece: "I got to know Father Corridan, a rangy, fast-talking, chain-smoking West Side product who talks the darndest language I ever heard, combining the gritty vocabulary of the longshoremen with mob talk, the statistical findings of a trained economist and the teachings of Christ."<sup>4</sup>

With a writer's ear, Schulberg picked up the language of the waterfront from the priests to the workers to the mob, and incorporated it into the dialogue of his script. But due to financial problems, this initial version of the waterfront story was never made, and the rights to Johnson's book, *Crime on the Labor Front*, reverted to Schulberg (see Georgakas for a full account).

The second path begins with Arthur Miller. In 1949 he was looking for a new project and became interested in the on-going waterfront struggles. He undoubtedly read Malcolm Johnson's articles, but Miller researched and wrote about the mob killing of a man named Peter Panto who tried to organize longshoremen in Brooklyn's Red



Hook district in the 1930s and whose body was dumped in the East River.<sup>5</sup> Because of their common interest in such social problems as union corruption, Miller talked to his friend Kazan about collaborating on a film. The resulting screenplay called *The Hook* was drafted between February of 1949 and the summer of 1950.<sup>6</sup> The title refers both to the Red Hook district of the Brooklyn waterfront, the setting for the film, and the longshoremen's hook. But like Schulberg's first script, this one too was never made. Miller pulled out when Harry Cohn of Columbia Pictures, on the advice of Roy Brewer of the Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals, suggested that it would be politically expedient to turn the waterfront mobsters into communists. In *Ciment*,<sup>2</sup> Kazan says he got a phone call from Miller saying he didn't want to do the picture" (102). He told Jeff Young, "I asked why, and he said he couldn't tell me. He never explained it" (125), but in *A Life*, Kazan elaborates the story in detail (410–415), and both Georgakas and Thomson discuss it in their essays in this volume.

In *A Life* Kazan credits his wife, Molly, with the idea of contacting Budd Schulberg (486). Kazan had fallen out with Arthur Miller. *The Hook* had just been the first straw; Kazan's friendly testimony before the HUAC was the last. Schulberg had not met Kazan before when he got a phone call from him in the spring of 1952 at his Bucks County Pennsylvania farm. They spent a weekend together, discussing possible projects, and decided on the waterfront subject since they had a common interest there and Schulberg had his unproduced screenplay and the rights to Malcolm Johnson's book.

Schulberg began by continuing his on-site waterfront research that he describes as "a year-long experience that I shared with Kazan" ("Afterword" to the script of *On the Waterfront* 145). All during this time he was also writing articles for *Commonweal*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *The Saturday Evening Post* about the longshoremen and their fight against the corrupt bosses who controlled their lives. He was their advocate; their cause became his cause. When Budd was ready to sit down and write the script, Kazan took a break from the project and went to work with Tennessee Williams on *Camino Real*, a successful production that reestablished him professionally. He came out of it, he says, "with a full tank of gas; my energy was back" (*A Life* 506).

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The script went through at least eight drafts. Even the shooting script which Kazan annotated as he was preparing the film (dated June 28, 1953 in the Archives at Wesleyan) is still called “The Golden Warriors,” and many of the characters do not yet have their final names – Johnny Friendly, for example, is still Mickey Friendly. Initially, the script was rejected by Darryl Zanuck at 20th Century-Fox, to whom Kazan still owed a picture. It is Zanuck who reputedly said, “Who’s going to care about a lot of sweaty longshoremen?” (“Afterword” 147). Then Warner Brothers said no, followed by Paramount and MGM. This is 1953, the height of anticommunist hysteria in this country, and a script that some now see as a justification for informing was, paradoxically, seen by the studios as “pink,” prolabor, prounion, maybe even “red.”

Sam Spiegel, maverick independent producer who still went by the pseudonym “S. P. Eagle,” came to the rescue and took on the project, eventually getting Columbia Pictures to distribute it. A fugitive from Hitler’s Germany in 1933, he had just done *The African Queen* with John Huston and the British production, *Melba*, directed by Lewis Milestone. Spiegel was an expert at wheeling and dealing in Hollywood. After Marlon Brando initially returned the *Waterfront* script, turning down the role of Terry Malloy, Kazan had contacted Frank Sinatra for the part – “He spoke perfect Hobokenese” (*A Life* 515) – but Spiegel managed to maneuver Marlon Brando into reconsidering. At the time, Brando was a much bigger star than Sinatra and that would help with financing. He had made *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *Viva Zapata* (1952) with Kazan, but said that because of the HUAC testimony he now would not work with him. Spiegel convinced him otherwise and today his Oscar-winning performance of a mumbling, touching, anguished, lonely orphan, a fighter whose swagger covers inner doubt, is the most memorable aspect of this film. Kazan has written “If there is a better performance by a man in the history of film in America, I don’t know what it is. . . . what was extraordinary is the contrast of the tough-guy front and the extreme delicacy and gentle cast of his behavior” (*A Life* 517).

The “Eagle,” as he was known, was a stickler for script, a “bear for structure,” who found *Waterfront* long and discursive (“Afterword” 141). The seemingly endless rewrites infuriated the screenwriter who, at one point, walked out. Draft number 6, simply titled “Waterfront,”