On the Waterfront

On the Waterfront comprehensively examines one of the most important films of the Hollywood canon. Providing the historical context for the film, this volume emphasizes film making as a collaborative process rather than an "auteurist" approach, although it does highlight individual contributions to the film and the political controversy generated by the cooperation of Kazan and Schulberg with the House Un-American Activities Committee. Included are essays specially commissioned for this volume, analyzing the screenplay, Kazan as director, Schulberg as screenplay writer, the score by Leonard Bernstein, and the reception of the film in classrooms. Collectively they demonstrate how and why this film has been an enduring favorite among cineastes and movie buffs alike. A foreword by Budd Schulberg, contemporary reviews, and stills round out the volume.

Joanna Rapf is Professor of English and Film & Video Studies at the University of Oklahoma, Norman. She is the author of *Buster Keaton: A Bio-Bibliography*, and has contributed to journals such as *Literature/Film Quarterly, Film Quarterly,* and *Journal of Popular Film & Television*.

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On the Waterfront

Edited by

JOANNA E. RAPF
University of Oklahoma

Foreword by

BUDD SCHULBERG

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For Budd and Maurice

"AEYBF"*

**as ever your best friend*

Budd Schulberg and Maurice Rapf at Fenway Park, Boston in 1999. (Courtesy of Joanna E. Rapf)

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— Joanna E. Rapf

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BUDD SCHULBERG

Foreword

Fifty years ago I was down on the New York waterfront, drawn to the cause of the longshoremen, the most exploited working men in America, hoping to put a film together for Elia Kazan. Urging me out of my self-imposed exile from film writing by saying his mission was to do a film of social content in the East, he had overcome my resistance by promising to treat my work with the same respect he would accord Arthur Miller's and Tennessee Williams's in the theater. Although raised in the film business, where my father had run a major studio for many years, I had chosen to live the free life of a novelist on a farm in eastern Pennsylvania. I resented the way writers – even the William Faulkners and Scott Fitzgeralds – were shuffled like cards in Hollywood, where producers, directors, and even egocentric stars presumed to have the last word, and where the lowly writers weren't even allowed on the set.

The subject we had chosen, labor racketeering and corruption in New York Harbor, was not exactly what Hollywood was looking for in the Eisenhower Fifties. When a maverick independent producer, Sam Spiegel, with a spectacular flop on his hands, *Melba*, raised $800,000 for Kazan to knock the picture off in thirty-five days, all we were hoping for was to get the picture to the screen. We had no illusions about a "hit." We simply had our hearts set on getting it made. When doubters would ask us "Do you really think people are going to like this picture?" all we could answer was "We have no idea. All we know is, we like it."

It had been strictly antiestablishment all the way. Yes, once Spiegel seduced a reluctant Brando into playing Terry Malloy, Columbia's honcho, Harry Cohn, had begrudged us that $800,000. But we had made it completely on our own terms, in subzero Hoboken in the winter of 1953–4, without a single set being built. The grungy rooftops and coldwater flats, the weather-beaten nineteenth-century piers and the hoary, mahogany bars of River Street had been our studio. From the time we started shooting, there had been no communication from Hollywood. We were orphans, which was fine with us. The only messages from Sam Spiegel signaled his alarm that Kazan was not shooting fast enough. Because Sam was afraid of Kazan's anger, and because he knew Kazan and I were close, he would call me at midnight or one o'clock in the morning, to urge me to push Kazan to go faster. I would try to reason with him that Hoboken was a fierce place in which to work with the bitter cold and hostile conditions. I'd reassure him that Kazan was performing miracles to adhere that closely to what was essentially a B schedule. Sam had known what it was to live from hand to mouth ever since he escaped the Nazis, and now he lived with the fear that if we ran out of money on the project, there would be no one to bail us out.

Spiegel's relentless breathing down Kazan's neck about staying on schedule provoked an exchange, the memory of which still makes us laugh. During the arduous script preparation, each time I thought we finally had the work pinned, Sam would follow up next day with "Why don't we open it up one more time?" In truth, I had started with a broader canvas, wanting to tell not only Terry Malloy's personal story, but the waterfront priest's, and to set it all in social perspective. I wanted to define the pecking order, right up to the Mayor and the "Mr. Big" who owned him. To give Spiegel his due, he hammered for tighter structure, and stronger (and what came to be total) focus on my main character. Precious scenes that added texture and complexity were jettisoned to the purpose of keeping it moving. The film asks "And then? And then? And then?" Often with a pang of regret I had to admit that in the interest of relentless storytelling, my pet sidebars had to go.

Sam Spiegel didn't give a damn about the cause of the longshoremen, and I resented that. But I had to admit, thinking pure *movie* now, Spiegel's insistence on *structure* was making for a better script.

But I finally dug my heels in when Spiegel wanted to cut drastically the scene in the hold when Father Barry delivers a fighting sermon over the body of Runty Nolan, the feisty little gadfly in the dock boss' ointment. I had lifted the speech almost bodily from one the "Waterfront Priest," Father John Corridan, had given on the docks, an incredible challenge to the lethal dock bosses in which he invoked Christ in the shape-up, holding a union card and being passed over unless He kicked back part of His miserable wages to the mobbed-up hiring boss. The speech had fascinated me, and I had worked hard to get it right. It ran six pages and Spiegel insisted it had to be slashed to a page, arguing that what might work in the theater or in a book could not be done in a film. This time I reminded Spiegel and Kazan of our unusual agreement by which the writer had final word on the script. But that didn't stop Sam. Next morning, in that disingenuous way he had, when we were to begin discussion of the following scene, Sam said, "Wait a minute, first I'd like to hear the cuts you made in the priest's scene." And when I told Sam through gritted teeth that I thought I had told him I wasn't changing a word of that scene, Sam looked truly hurt. "But Budd, I thought you said yesterday you finally agreed to cut it."

I blew up. "That's it, I'm finished, I'm quitting!" My nerves were raw. I had been on this project for more than two years now, mostly on what we called "spec," and things had been so lean that I actually had had to mortgage my farm. A $5,000 advance against my quixotic financial interest in the film had been postponed from month to month. To head off this crisis, Kazan suggested we take a walk around the block. The main thrust of his argument was "Look, Sam can be maddening, he can drive you crazy, even if sometimes he's right. But never forget, he was the only one we could find who would do our picture. Spiegel saved our ass."

That stopped me. I had to agree and so back to Sam's expensive suite at the St. Regis (charged to our picture) we went. Finally, with a late-in-the game assist from Kazan, I got my way and Father Barry's six-page "sermon" in the hold stayed in the script.

The shoot began with the scenes on the rooftop, very rough work since all the equipment had to be dragged up a four-floor walkup, and the wind chill had everybody's teeth rattling. In fact, Marlon's remark was classic: "It's so fucking cold up here there's no way we

could overact." But the technical problems kept mounting and near the second day Sam Spiegel arrived to protest that production was already half a day behind schedule. Now it was Kazan's turn to blow up. If this was the kind of producer interference he was facing, to hell with it, he was quitting! I said "Gadg, let's take a walk around the block," and when we walked away from the set, I echoed Kazan's words after my blowup with Spiegel: "Look, he may be a pain in the butt, but never forget he was the only one we could find who would do our picture. Spiegel saved our ass." Kazan's wrath turned to laughter, and he climbed back to the roof and got back to work.

Our sense of alienation from mainline Hollywood continued when Kazan ran the rough cut for Harrry Cohn in his private projection room at the studio. I was waiting at the farm for Cohn's reaction. How a studio launches a film is usually vital to its success. How many prints? How much advertising? Any press tours?

The call came in at 1 A.M.: "Budd, I don't know what to tell you. I'm still in shock. I just came out of the projection room. Just the two of us, well three, Harry had this Latin c____ with him. I sat right behind them. They were all over each other all through the picture. When the lights came on they just got up and walked out. Never even looked back. Never even said good night. I think he hates the picture."

Another reason for the cold shoulder, we learned, is that the in-house Oscar contender was his *The Caine Mutiny*, a major production starring Humphrey Bogart. The toughest of all the moguls wanted to play down his own competition. So when our picture opened unheralded one morning at the Astor, Kazan and I went down to see if anybody was going to show up. To our amazement, the line went on into the next block. Father Corridan and my longshoremen friends were with us and we reasoned that with twenty-five thousand longshoremen on the books, and that many more involved in the work of the harbor, plus all the mob guys, naturally they'd all turn out opening day. So we still thought it was a one-day phenomenon. It was not until *The New York Times* came out next day with a rave and nonwaterfront people came lining up that it began to dawn on us that it might be more than a one-day wonder. Even when it remained a hot ticket at the Astor all week long, we dismissed our success as a local phenomenon. This was a New York City movie after all. Beyond

the Hudson River, where we shot the film, we still feared Zanuck's dire prophecy: "Who's gonna care about a lot of sweaty longshoremen?" So we were amazed when moviegoers flocked to it in Georgia, Michigan, Kansas, Texas . . . and when we won all those foreign festival awards. Fifty years later, as this book goes to press, that same sense of surprise at its success has never left us. We still remember our saying to each other, "All we know is, we like it." That it would one day be included in the American Film Institute's all-time top ten and become an icon of thumb-to-nose independent filmmaking seemed as long a shot as betting that Henry Wallace would be the next president of the United States.

It winning all those Oscars, and wiping out Cohn's pet *Caine Mutiny*, didn't soften our hearts toward the Hollywood establishment. We remained our curmudgeonly selves by refusing to attend the Academy's snooty postaward Governor's Ball. Instead, we threw our own bash at a favorite Chinese restaurant, The House of Chan, with some of the cast, all of the crew, the core group of rebel longshoremen, and the ex-fighters I knew and had brought in to play the racketeer union goons. Strictly blue collar all the way. Even that night, in the glow of sweet revenge, Kazan and I would not have believed that our film would be remembered, even revered into the next millennium.

Why the film has never gone away is open to many interpretations. There is, of course – so perfectly serving the story and the theme – the haunting quality of the acting, the directional energy, the low-key but unforgettable photography, Leonard Bernstein's first-time-ever score, and the gorgeously unpretentious look of Hoboken itself, a nineteenth-century town where the Italians and the Irish were duking it out every day for control and survival on the docks.

Elsewhere I've described the ideal motion picture as a horse race in which all the entries get their noses to the finish line in a dead heat. It's a small miracle when two of them make it, and when every element is there at the wire it's a *Lord of the Rings* miracle.

Of course I realize not every critic sees it that way. While most of the contributors to this book analyze the film in terms of its virtues, there are a few that see it through a darker glass. Some of the negative comments are, to my mind, so perverse that I confess to having had moments when I wondered if I could write this Foreword. One contributor thinks it has no relevance today because it is so completely

and narrowly of its own time. He finds a very different reaction from that of the many young audiences with whom I have viewed it. I think they react so positively because – despite the old-fashioned black-and-white look and union labor battles that may be ancient history – this is essentially a theme that will be relevant as long as the human mind is a hive of conflicting passions, loyalties, ideals. "Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." The conflict is universal, to be or not to be, to do or not to do. In particular, we were telling what I saw as the true story of exploitation of the dock workers in the harbor of New York. We were telling a story I could document scene by scene as to how a racketeer waterfront local held its browbeaten membership in thrall, parceling out the jobs four hours at a time, demanding fat kickbacks from their measly wages, breaking their legs if they protested and whacking them if they persisted. But in general we were after something we all face every day of our lives. Our waterfront story could be retold today whenever the haves give it to the have-nots. Instead of Johnny Friendly's easy money boys, we've got the Enron hundred-million-dollar high flyers saying like the unreconstructed Terry Malloy, "Do it to them before they do it to me." And we've got the whistle blowers whose hearts are with the thousands of innocent employees seeing their pensions and their life savings blown away.

Among some effective essays here, including the editor's knowledgeable and lively introduction, are some ivory tower aberrations that pass for academic criticism. One of them questions why the dock boss, Johnny Friendly, chooses Terry's brother Charley to warn Terry to dummy up – or else! – when facing the Waterfront Crime Commission. Apparently reality has no bearing on highbrow preconceptions. Otherwise, it should be obvious that Terry's brother is the logical if not the only choice to beg the kid to stay "D 'n D" and save his life. If there's anyone who could persuade Terry not to testify against the Friendly mob, it's his only brother, who loves him even as he uses him. This critic then crawls further out on his shaky limb by suggesting that a better film would be based on Terry's brother, "Charley the Gent." Terry isn't quite Hamlet, but I found myself wondering if this critic would have suggested that Shakespeare should have elevated Ophelia's brother to the main character in *Hamlet* and changed the title to "Laertes."

Another off-the-wall response to the film, echoing the Stalinoid ideologues Lindsay Anderson and John Howard Lawson, is the accusation that the ending is "fascist" because one man, Terry Malloy, leads the embattled longshoremen onto the pier, breaking the hold of the dock boss. As a lifelong member and advocate of organized labor, I would think it obvious that there is no conflict between democratic unions and strong leaders. One need only think of Harry Bridges and the west coast longshoremen, Walter Reuther and the Automobile Workers Union, Dubinsky and his Ladies' Garment Workers Union . . . dominant men, yes, but at regular intervals willing to take their chances in democratic elections, as contrasted with the Jimmy Hoffas and the Tough Tony Anastasias. 180 degrees from "fascism," the waterfront ending was influenced by the courageous behavior of Johnny Dwyer who dared stand up to the "pistols" of Local 895 on the west side of Manhattan. One day, most dramatically, they refused to go in to work when the mob *gauleiter*, Eddie Thompson, blew the whistle. Only when the stevedore finally turned to Dwyer and asked him to blow it, would the men "vote with their feet" by following him into work. I described that turning point in another article I wrote for *The New York Times Magazine* (Sept. 27, 1953), "How One Pier Got Rid Of The Mob." Later I drew on this unique event for the ending of our film. I would have thought that academics would have researched that article, along with the many others I did for various magazines when Father Corridan asked for my help in bringing to public attention the plight of the longshoreman, until then an untold story.

Perhaps most vexing of all the negative comments is the academic fixation that Terry's denouncing the "Pistol Local" to the Waterfront Crime Commisssion is an apology and a metaphor for the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings on Communism in Hollywood. That is not what Elia Kazan asked me to do when he came to see me, and in no way was that my motivation for wanting to write this film. What disturbs me most about this aspersion – repeated in film schools across the country until it's become academic gospel – is that if you think of the longshoremen as merely stand-ins or surrogates for the Hollywood testifiers, you trivialize the ordeal of the actual longshoremen who had to overcome their terror in order to testify against the lethal thugs who ran the ILA. I remember the

many nights in the St. Xavier Church basement when Father Corridan urged the frightened rebels to testify, and later I watched them under fire while attending all forty days of the hearings. One who helped the research and became a friend, Tommy Bull from Hoboken, had to ship out all the way to Australia to save his life. Tony Mike diVincenzo, the Hoboken dock boss who came over to the side of the angels, was also in danger, and so were other St. Xavier rebs in fear for their lives. I had written an earlier *Waterfront* without Terry's testimony. It was only when I monitored those incredible hearings that I became convinced that the real waterfront was writing our ending for us. That's the true reason why the testimony scene is in the film and keys the climax.

But despite all these detours from reality one might expect from professors, scholars, or critics with their own hard-nosed agendas, I commend the editor for putting together what I believe to be the first comprehensive study of our film. How to get all those horses' noses to the finish line in a dead heat deserves the attention of every true believer in making and watching films that don't merely entertain but seek to stir our social conscience and make a difference.

Brookside
February 20, 2002