Marlon Brando, 1924-2004

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Perhaps the greatest American actor of his generation, Marlon Brando, died Friday in Los Angeles. Brando was 80 years old.

Obituaries will inevitably refer to Brando's career as "checkered" and "uneven," referring to the long stretches during which he enjoyed neither commercial nor even critical success. We will be told that he wasted his talent, that he was narcissistic and difficult to direct, that his end was rather sad, and so forth.

Of course there was a personally tragic element to Brando's life and career, but a far larger tragedy lies in the incapacity of the American cinema to have consistently provided him with the opportunity to reveal and work through his extraordinary sensitivity and dynamism. That Brando had few opportunities over the past 30 years—indeed relatively few over the last 40, the greater part of his adult life—to perform in serious roles is one of the strongest indictments of the American film industry that one could make.

In the end, Brando's incompatibility with the commercial film industry was not due to his personal ticks and neuroses, however real they may have been. Like other postwar figures whose careers were aborted or who came to tragic ends, like Orson Welles and Marilyn Monroe, Brando was by nature allergic to corruption and insincerity. Incorrigibly dedicated to going deeper into the human personality and condition, how could Brando have found a comfortable niche in the film industry of the past several decades?

Brando was born in 1924 in Omaha, Nebraska, to an actress mother and a salesman father. By all accounts family life was turbulent, with his mother accusing his father of ruining her career. Columnist Bob Thomas quotes Brando as once telling him, "My father was a traveling salesman and my mother was a drunk, and I had a complete nervous breakdown at the age of 19. I might easily have become a criminal. Only by 10 years of intensive psychoanalysis did I manage to retain my sanity."

The Brandos moved to Illinois and Marlon was eventually sent to a military academy in Minnesota, from which he was expelled before graduation. Brando moved to New York in 1943, and first gained recognition as Nels in the stage production of the drama about Scandinavian immigrants, *I Remember Mama*, in 1944.

Brando studied acting at the Dramatic Workshop at the New School for Social Research in New York, where he was a pupil of acting teacher Stella Adler. "The Method," based loosely on Stanislavsky's naturalistic methods, became a fashionable style of acting—and term—in that period. One must say that Brando transcended any particular method of acting through his insistence on the truth of the emotions and circumstances.

Brando said simply of Adler, "She taught me to be real and not to try to act out an emotion I didn't personally experience during a performance." Brando's classmates included Harry Belafonte, Shelley Winters and Rod Steiger. This was a left-wing atmosphere, with the Communist Party exercising a considerable influence.

Brando became famous as a result of his stage performance in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947, as the crude, brutish Stanley Kowalski. After a screen debut in *The Men* (directed by Fred Zinnemann), about paraplegic war veterans, in 1950 Brando reprised his role in the film version of Williams's melodrama, directed by Elia Kazan (1951).

I commented on the three films Brando made with Kazan, who notoriously turned informer in 1952, in a piece on the latter when he was honored in 1999 at the Academy Awards ceremony.

"Kazan made three of his next four films with Brando—*A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *Viva Zapata!* (1952) and *On the Waterfront* (1954). I have to admit a prejudice here: relatively little sympathy for the Williams-Arthur Miller-Strasberg-Kazan school of drama and acting. I've always thought there was something provincial and stunted about the conceptions of its leading lights. Most of their work, it seems to me, suffered from a false 'depth,' a kind of cluttered psychologizing that covered up at least as much as it revealed. This is obviously a subject that deserves a special study.

"In any case, I've always found *A Streetcar Named Desire* particularly problematic. A recent viewing tempered my hostility somewhat. There are some telling moments and genuine feelings in the piece. I still find it hard to take, however. Brando and Kim Hunter make it watchable, particularly the former. I do not know how much credit Kazan deserves for Brando's performance, but its restraint, in the midst of a great deal of noisy thrashing about, is remarkable. Brando's Kowalski is wonderfully relaxed and amused, at least in the early scenes. After that everything goes to pieces in this story about 'a neurotic Southern girl on the last lap to the mental ward,' in critic Manny Farber's words.

"*Viva Zapata!* has its excesses and its silly moments, but this is one of Kazan's most creditable works, in my view. Brando is excellent as the Mexican revolutionary and the film as a whole, from a screenplay by John Steinbeck, is done with a certain degree of tact and intelligence. The film's vision of a revolutionary so appalled by the occupational hazards of holding power that he walks away from it remains a compelling, if not entirely satisfying one. From the sociopolitical point of view, this is the one film of Kazan's, if one can make such narrow distinctions, that might be characterized as anti-Stalinist, not anticommunist.

"*On the Waterfront* tells the story of Terry Malloy (Brando), a longshoreman and former boxer, who ends up telling a crime commission everything he knows about the operations of the corrupt and murderous local union leadership. Kazan and screenwriter Budd Schulberg, also a HUAC informer, made the film in large measure to justify their own actions. In his autobiography Brando makes two remarkable claims: first, that 'I did not realize then ... that *On the Waterfront* was really a metaphorical argument' by Kazan and Schulberg 'to justify finking on their friends'; second, that when shown the completed film, 'I was so depressed by my performance I got up and left the screen room. I thought I was a huge failure.' The film stands up, despite its reactionary and self-serving theme, primarily because of the performances of Brando and Eva Marie Saint and its overall grittiness. It also has an extraordinary score by Leonard Bernstein.

"The notion, however, that *On the Waterfront* captures metaphorically the truth of Kazan's relationship to the Communist Party, on the one hand, and HUAC, on the other, is fanciful, as is the idea that the film somehow brings out the 'dilemma' facing the potential informer. Where is the 'moral ambiguity' in Malloy's position that Kazan has referred to

on various occasions? If Brando's character does not speak to the authorities and seek their protection, he is likely to be rubbed out. He is fighting for his life and has no choice, within the framework established by the film's creators, but to turn on his former associates. Kazan and Schulberg have stacked the deck entirely in their favor.

"How do the fictional circumstances in *On the Waterfront* resemble the reality of the early 1950s in the US? In turning informer, it was Kazan who joined a political lynch mob. The Communist Party was not simply synonymous with its Stalinist leadership and program. It contained devoted and self-sacrificing individuals, who believed they were fighting for progressive social change. Terry Malloy's traumatic experiences have more in common with those endured by the actors, directors and writers *who faced the blacklist* than with those who accepted and profited from it.

"If Kazan had made *'On the Set'* instead, about a well-paid and successful director who cravenly surrendered to right-wing political forces, would it have had the same resonance? (Brando's failure to see any connection between Kazan's informing and his own character's behavior is comprehensible precisely because the situation set up in the film is so at odds with the director's actual circumstances. Indeed, the strength of the film is that one would not regard it as a defense of cowardice and opportunism without a knowledge of the historical and personal facts.)"

And further on Kazan and Brando: "In his autobiography, *A Life*, Kazan has the grace to credit Brando with finding the 'tone of reproach that is so loving and so melancholy' in the taxicab scene in *On the Waterfront*. He writes: 'I didn't direct that; Marlon showed me, as he often did, how the scene should be performed. ... Marlon was always presenting me with these small miracles; he was more often than not better than I, and I could only be grateful for him.' I suspect that points to an elementary truth, which is nothing for Kazan to be ashamed about: that Brando was a more significant figure in relation to film acting, than Kazan was to film directing."

Brando's role as Marc Antony in *Julius Caesar* for Joseph Mankiewicz was sandwiched between the Kazan efforts, but much of the actor's work in the mid- and late-1950s came in mediocre films (*Desirée*, *Guys and Dolls*, *The Teahouse of the August Moon*, *The Young Lions*). Brando had become sufficiently discontented by the end of the decade that he formed his own production company and produced, directed and starred in *One-Eyed Jacks* (1961), a revenge Western.

Critic Andrew Sarris described the latter film as "quite charming in a disorganized sort of way, with Brando's Western hero closer to Heathcliff than to Hopalong Cassidy." Brando later described directing films as an "ass-breaker."

He remained politically involved. In 1959 Brando attended a meeting to found the Hollywood branch of the Committee for a SANE Nuclear Policy along with Henry Fonda, Marilyn Monroe, Arthur Miller, Harry Belafonte and Ossie Davis. In May 1960, along with Shirley MacLaine and others, he attended a rally outside San Quentin prison to protest the pending execution of rapist Caryl Chessman, an event that had an impact on the national conscience. Later that same summer Brando showed up opening night at the Democratic Party national convention that nominated John F. Kennedy as its candidate.

The actor was a prominent participant in the August 1963 mass march on Washington for civil rights, addressed by Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1964, while on a visit to London, Brando took part in a vigil outside the South African embassy demanding the release of South African political prisoners and launched an appeal to actors, producers, directors and script-writers to have clauses written into all future contracts forbidding the screening of their films before segregated audiences.

From the early 1960s Brando also associated himself with Native American rights, getting arrested in 1963 in the state of Washington to support Native American fishing rights. In 1976 Brando posted bond for American Indian Movement leader Dennis Banks when he was arrested in San Francisco.

His radical social views no doubt influenced his unhappiness with the increasingly conformist character of the film roles he was offered. After sharp disagreements with director Lewis Milestone on *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1962), during which Milestone claimed Brando used to stuff cotton in his ears so as to block out the director's instructions, the actor became known as "difficult."

Brando made every effort to appear in more intrepid, independent works, acting for Arthur Penn in *The Chase* (1966), Charlie Chaplin in the underrated *A Countess from Hong Kong* (1967), John Huston in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1967) and Italian leftist Gillo Pontecorvo in *Burn!* (1970).

In a recent interview, Maria Esposito of the WSWS asked Pontecorvo about Brando. The director replied: "I consider Brando a true genius of cinema and probably one of the most extraordinary actors in film, but he is also a person who is moody and difficult. He's like a racehorse of extreme sensitivity. Although difficult to work with, he is also very professional and in the end does what he is asked to do.

"It was very difficult during the production of *Burn*. There was a continuous struggle and it was so tense in the last month of filming that Marlon and I did not speak to each other. [Reportedly Brando would not appear on the set of *The Score* in 2001 at the same time as the director Frank Oz.] I gave him instructions about what I wanted him to do through my assistant director. We did not even shake hands at the end of the film or even say goodbye, such was the tension.

"We re-established relations later, however. In fact, a year and half after *Burn* he wanted to make a film about the rights of American Indians and asked if I could do it. When I saw him I said: 'So you're crazier than I thought. It's clear to me that your character hasn't changed and neither has mine, so if we try to make a film we'll be fighting again within three days.'

"And he said, 'No, no, no, I really care about this for political and moral reasons. I think that you're very suitable to make this film and I beg you to do it.' So I said let's see what happens but then requested that I be able to live for at least 20 days, or a month, on an Indian reservation, to find out how they spoke and lived, etc.

"He agreed and I spent nearly a month on the reservation, which was desperately poor. It was a very interesting experience. Unfortunately the film was never made for reasons outside my and Marlon's control. I am very pleased, however, to have experienced the month that I spent with the Sioux Indians in South Dakota."

The radicalization of the late 1960s and early 1970s provided Brando with more interesting material, including *Burn!*, *The Godfather* (1972), *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Brando approached the role of Don Vito Corleone in *The Godfather* as a critique of American business and corporate greed, playing against author Mario Puzo's conception of the character, and his performance is indelible in that light. He reportedly based his famous voice on the appearance of crime boss Frank Costello before the Kefauver committee in 1951.

When Brando won the Academy Award for *The Godfather*, he sent as his representative to accept the award an actress who attempted to read Brando's 15-page indictment of the treatment of Native Americans. A determined opponent of American capitalism and its brutalities home and abroad, Brando participated in "Free Huey" rallies in defense of Black Panther leader Huey P. Newton, after the latter's arrest in Oakland, California in 1968.

After *Apocalypse Now*, and one must reluctantly admit that the Brando-Kurtz character is the murkiest and weakest element in Francis Ford Coppola's remarkable film, there is next to nothing, with the possible exception of *A Dry White Season* (1989), the anti-apartheid film for which he received another Academy Award nomination.

Brando expressed his increasing disgust for the film industry and even for the acting profession. Some of his comments need to be taken with a grain of salt, as deliberate provocations, but the depths of his feelings need not be questioned.

He would tell interviewers: “The only reason I’m here in Hollywood is because I don’t have the moral courage to refuse the money.” Or, “If there’s anything unsettling to the stomach, it’s watching actors on television talk about their personal lives.” Or, “An actor’s a guy who, if you ain’t talking about him, ain’t listening.”

Brando’s imitators, and there continue to be many, have attempted to emulate him by concentrating primarily on his extraordinary intuition, through demonstrating sharp mood swings, for example, and apparently unexplained or arbitrary outbursts. Such moments occur in Brando’s acting no doubt. There is more than that, however, in his best work.

An actor’s skill is certainly bound up with an acute, often only semi-conscious insight into human behavior and personality. A great actor, however, must know and feel something for the world, for the widest concerns of humanity, must *share* the widest concerns of humanity. The depth of Brando’s intensity was grounded in the final analysis, not simply in individual discontent and anxiety, but in a protest against the conditions of life offered to millions. This was Brando’s advantage over nearly everyone who came after him.

He will be remembered as a charismatic performer, an independent and uncompromising figure and a genuine rebel.