Brando's Smile: His Life, Thought, and Work: A biography of the remarkable actor

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In *Brando's Smile: His Life, Thought and Work,* Susan L. Mizruchi dispels a number of myths and misconceptions surrounding Marlon Brando (1924-2004), the most dynamic American actor of the 20th century.

Basing herself in particular on an examination of Brando's large book collection, film scripts, research materials and notes for films, Mizruchi gives us a far more complex and believable Marlon Brando than the inarticulate, boorish figure handed down to us by a sensationalist media.

Mizruchi, professor of English at Boston University, has chosen to focus on the three myths that are perhaps most present in public consciousness: that Brando was an inarticulate and uneducated person who elevated coarseness into a model for 1950s behavior; that he was a fair-weather friend of the oppressed; and that, after the early 1960s, Brando was only in the movie business for money.

Born in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1924, Marlon Brando moved with his family to Evanston, Illinois when he was six and to Libertyville, Illinois when he was fourteen. From his mother, Dodie, Marlon inherited his interest in acting and a genuine, deeply felt concern for the oppressed. According to the biographer, Dodie's alcoholism made her unreliable and would cause her son to distrust women and make it impossible for him to be in a committed relationship.

The son inherited his physical appearance from his father, Marlon Sr. An insecure man who never equated being a salesman with success, the father physically beat his son on a number of occasions and was a stern disciplinarian, helping to generate his son's lifelong hostility to authority figures. Marlon Jr. would later say, "If I have a scene to play and have to be angry, I can remember my father hitting me."

Though an avid reader, Marlon's rebelliousness made for a poor student. He failed kindergarten and the eighth grade, and was ultimately expelled from Shattuck Military School in Minnesota (which his father had attended), even though Marlon's gift for acting was already recognized. He never graduated from high school.

Mizruchi makes clear that Brando was a deeply cultured and thoughtful individual. She points to his remarkable, extensively annotated book collection, which would eventually grow to over 4,000 volumes, including works on philosophy, history, literature and science. His library contained the complete works of Shakespeare (as well as critical commentaries), Freud, Jung, Albert Camus and over 700 books on American Indians alone.

From his earliest Broadway appearance in Ben Hecht's antifascist *A Flag is Born* (1946), Brando's reading informed his characterizations. During the making of Elia Kazan's *On the Waterfront* (1954) , Brando read books and essays about Camus' *The Rebel*. For Edward Dmytryk's *The Young Lions* (1958) , Brando made a study of Wilhelm Reich's *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* and annotated those passages that argued against portraying fascism as the province of a single nation.

He would also prepare for his roles in Kazan's *Viva Zapata!* (1952) and *One-Eyed Jacks* (1961, which he ended up directing) by reading extensively about America's native population. For Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), he turned to two of philosopher Hannah Arendt's works.

Brando's annotations also reveal someone who read for personal growth. In his copy of Emily Dickinson's complete poems, he notes his identification with her "nonconformist" stance.

Anyone who remains skeptical of Brando's ability to articulate clear and informed ideas is welcome to go to YouTube and click on Marlon Brando and Dick Cavett and listen to their conversations on Cavett's late-night talk show.

Brando's Smile also puts to rest the claim that the actor was an opportunistic ally of the oppressed who protested their plight solely or even partly for publicity purposes.

As early as 1943, Brando, along with actors such as Paul Muni, Edward G. Robinson, John Garfield and Sylvia Sydney, appeared in the dramatic pageant "We Will Never Die," to raise awareness about the murder of the European Jews. Forty thousand people attended the pageant, which was written by Hecht with a score by Kurt Weill, at Madison Square Garden in New York.

Brando remained an extremely private person after he attained celebrity status. At the same time, Mizruchi insists, he always treated his celebrity as a means to public ends and "he sided instinctively with the vulnerable and excluded."

The actor's participation in the civil rights movement and Vietnam-era protests is well known. Even better known perhaps—and more notorious—was his decision to have a Native American activist, Sacheen Littlefeather, appear in his stead at the 1973 Academy Award ceremony and explain why he would not show up and accept his Best Actor award for *The Godfather*, because of Hollywood's treatment of American Indians.

Mizruchi argues that the members of the Academy, as well as the media, had it wrong when they claimed that Brando himself should have turned down the award on the Indians' behalf. Instead, the biographer reveals that by substituting an "American Indian for a Hollywood Star," Brando gave the American Indians "the worldwide audience he had been struggling to give them for more than a decade. It [the substitution] also supported his long-standing critique of a profit-driven media and the base cravings it fed." Whatever one thinks of the value of the gesture, Brando's willingness to stand up for principle cannot be questioned.

The argument that Brando was only in it "for the money" after the mid-1960s is belied by his performances in and preparations for such movies as *Burn!* (1969), *Last Tango in Paris* (1972), *The Godfather, The Missouri Breaks* (1976), *A Dry White Season* (1989) and *Apocalypse Now*. His performance in the last-named film as the war-maddened Special Forces Colonel Walter E. Kurtz was the outcome of extensive reading on the Vietnam War—as well as Eastern philosophy—and the decision to "restructure" the plot and write Kurtz's speeches, including in the final, death scene, which Brando would identify as "one of the best scenes I've ever played."

This reviewer doesn't agree with that assessment, but the effort he put into developing his character demonstrably proves that he was not walking through his roles at that time.

Almost inevitably, given the complex public character of Brando's life and the current intellectual climate, there are dissatisfying elements about Mizruchi's biography.

Some overall perspective on postwar America, which would have to include a serious evaluation of the anticommunist witch hunts and their long-term impact, is necessary to get a firm grasp on certain of the contradictory elements of Brando's outlook and evolution. The damaging influence of existentialism and various strands of academic anti-Marxism, which intellectuals like the actor imbibed without perhaps even realizing it fully in the late 1940s and early 1950s, is one subject that would have to be tackled.

A 19-year-old Marlon Brando arrived in New York City in 1943 and quickly enrolled at The New School for Social Research. Mizruchi informs us that the New School formulated and taught a theory of totalitarianism, "which posited basic similarities between fascist and communist regimes." Arendt, whom Brando read closely, was a member of the faculty at this time and promoted this theory vigorously.

Mizruchi presents these facts, but the biographer does not tell us whether she agrees with this conception, what role it might have played in the post-World War II "red scare" and Cold War or the degree to which Brando agreed with it. Moreover, what impact the pessimistic and morbid implications of existentialism and the Frankfurt School might have had on Brando's approach to film and acting is also not addressed.

In his autobiography, *Brando: Songs My Mother Taught Me* (1994), the actor/memoirist writes with considerable passion and authenticity, especially about politics and acting. Unfortunately, much of Brando's discussion about these subjects does not find a way into Mizruchi's biography. Why more of these passages were not included or subjected to analysis can only be guessed at, but their absence weakens an otherwise important work.

Minus these flaws, *Brando's Smile: His Life, Thought and Work* serves as a significant corrective to the mythmaking that attended, and still attends, Marlon Brando's life and work. By dispelling the myths surrounding her subject, Mizruchi has provided us with a far more compelling and complete portrait.