

Marlon Brando at 100

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“All my life I’ve questioned why I should do something. I had contempt for authority. I would resist it, I would trick it, I would outmaneuver it, I would do anything rather than be treated like a cipher.”

“I am really moved and motivated by things that occur that are unjust. I’ve always hated people trampling on other people.”

—Marlon Brando

April 3 marked 100 years since the birth of actor Marlon Brando in Omaha, Nebraska. He died in July 2004.

Brando was a film and stage actor who enjoyed at certain points immense popular and financial success, but, above all, he was someone who strove for artistic and social truth in everything he did. The conditions, in the postwar American film world in particular, were not often favorable to the level of commitment he demanded of himself and of others. This brought down upon his head much abuse and slander and also—along with a series of personal tragedies—disappointed and wore him down in the end. He truly fell “upon the thorns of life” and bled.

On one of the audiotapes Brando left behind at the time of his death, he explained, “I wanted very much to be involved in motion pictures, so I could change it into something nearer the truth. And I was convinced that I could do that.” (Excerpts from the tapes are presented in Stevan Riley’s remarkable 2015 documentary, *Listen To Me Marlon*.)

If Brando did not succeed as he would have liked, if he even took on occasion serious missteps, it was not for a lack of will. No one in postwar American cultural life was more determined to change the prevailing conditions or exhausted him or herself more in that effort. His life and struggle verify once again Marx’s well-known observation that human beings “make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances.”

It is a paradox that Brando was perhaps the finest screen actor of his time, or any time, yet never appeared in a genuine artistic masterpiece. The films he is perhaps best known for, directed by Elia Kazan, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) and *On the Waterfront* (1954), are intensely problematic works, artistically and, in the second case, also morally and politically.

Kazan infamously ratted in April 1952 to the House Un-American Activities Committee about his former Communist Party comrades. He directed *On the Waterfront* to elevate the informer to the status of a social hero. The film concerns a longshoreman who eventually agrees to testify before a crime commission against a local union leadership. In his autobiography, Brando makes the remarkable but no doubt sincere claim that “I did not realize then ... that *On the Waterfront* was really a metaphorical argument” by Kazan and screenwriter Budd Schulberg [also an informer] “to justify finking on their friends.”

Brando also explained in his memoirs that when shown the completed version of *On the Waterfront*, “I was so depressed by my performance I got up and left the screen room. I thought I was a huge failure.” On another occasion, he explained, “I was so embarrassed, so disappointed in my performance.” In fact, despite its immense notoriety, Brando’s

performance is overwrought and, at times, almost a caricature of “Method” acting. Unhappily, Kazan succeeded in communicating something of his own lack of principle, self-pity and intense bad faith through Brando and other performers.

Last Tango in Paris (1972) has interesting moments of Brando revealing something about his own life, but it is a pretentious, dubious work overall. He appeared in two films directed by Francis Ford Coppola, *The Godfather* (1972) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). The former has intriguing and forthright elements, depicting organized crime as a division of American big business. Brando saw the story as being “about the corporate mind, because the Mafia is the best example of capitalists we have” (cited in Stefan Kanfer’s biography, *Somebody*). However, the film glamorizes and romanticizes the Mafia thugs, also one of Brando’s concerns prior to filming. His portion of *Apocalypse Now*, a film that includes striking imagery of American military violence and madness during the Vietnam War, sadly, is the work’s weakest and murkiest.

On another of the tapes, the actor later commented bitterly,

I didn’t make any great movies. There’s no such thing as a great movie. In the kingdom of the blind, the man with one eye is the king. There are no artists. We are businessmen, we’re merchants. And there is no art. Agents, lawyers, publicity people. ... It’s all bullshit. Money, money, money. If you think it’s about something else, you’re going to be bruised.

Brando involved himself to the best of his power and ability in the civil rights movement, opposition to nuclear arms and the death penalty, the cause of Native Americans. Author James Baldwin recalled that Brando was “totally unconventional and independent, a beautiful cat. Race truly meant nothing to him—he was contemptuous of anyone who discriminated in any way.” The actor himself said, “I’m standing up, not for the black race, I’m standing up for the human race. All men are created equal.”

Notably, when Brando won an Academy Award for *The Godfather* in March 1973, he sent Native activist Sacheen Littlefeather to take his place and reject the award because of “the treatment of American Indians today by the film industry.” At the time, some 200 Oglala Lakota and followers of the American Indian Movement (AIM) were occupying Wounded Knee, South Dakota, on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. In fact, Brando emerged in the late 1960s in particular as a severe critic of American capitalist society. The FBI had kept him under surveillance since the 1940s.

Two letters to the *Los Angeles Times* in July 2004, at the time of his death, express something about Brando as a human being and social personality. The late professor Susanne Jonas, a scholar in Latin American studies, explained that in response to an op-ed piece she had written criticizing US actions in Guatemala, Brando “contacted me and initiated an hourlong discussion about the history of U.S. operations there. Outraged at U.S. military training and CIA manuals on killing in Central America, he wanted to understand how it was possible to turn normal

American boys into killers and torturers abroad.”

The second *Times* letter came from one Jon Dosa, who had been the producer of a television talk show in the Bay Area in 1968. Two Black Panther leaders, Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver, had been booked to appear. Brando was accompanying them. “Although his reclusive nature and disdain for public attention was well established by then,” Dosa wrote, “I approached him with the request that he join the two dissidents on the show. He declined the invitation. I said, ‘Of course, you must realize that if you appear, everybody will watch.’ Without any further hesitation, he agreed. ... The show got the press’ attention and, of course, everybody watched it.”

Brando grew up in an unhappy family. His father, a salesman, who had his own history of family neglect, “was tough,” according to his son. “He was a bar fighter. He was a man with not much love in him. Staying away from home, drinking and whoring all around the Midwest. He used to slap me around, and for no good reason.”

The actor described his mother, who was an aspiring actress, as “the town drunk. She began to dissolve and fray at the ends. When my mother was missing. Gone off someplace, we didn’t know where she was. I used to have to go and get her out of jail. Memories even now that fill me with shame and anger.”

On one occasion, Brando recalled, “my old man was punching my mother and I went up the stairs and I went in the room. And I had so much adrenaline, and I looked at him and I fucking put my eyes right through him and I said, ‘If you hit her again, I am going to kill you.’”

Brando was sent to military school, to make “a man of him.” He despised it. “It was a cruel and unusual punishment. The mind of the military has one aim: to be as mechanical as possible. To function like a human machine. Individuality simply did not exist. I had a lot of loneliness.”

At 19, he headed to New York City, eventually coming under the wing of famed acting teacher Stella Adler, whom Brando credited with transforming his life. “I arrived in New York,” he explains on one of his audiotapes, “with holes in my socks and holes in my mind. I remember getting drunk, lying down on the sidewalk and going to sleep. Nobody bothered me. I was always somebody who had an unquenchable curiosity about people. I liked to walk down the street and look at faces.”

Brando brought this “unquenchable curiosity” into his acting. He electrified audiences from his first performances on stage with his naturalness and honesty.

His performances in *The Men* (1950), *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Viva Zapata!* (1952), *Julius Caesar* (1953), *The Wild One* (1953) and *On the Waterfront* turned him into a film star, an international celebrity, something he was extremely uncomfortable with. He refused to discuss his stardom or his acting with anyone. His children would later learn that questions about his performances only angered him.

Brando represented something meaningful and inspiring for a generation searching for an alternative to deadening Cold War, Eisenhower America. “It was pre-sixties,” he said. “People were looking for rebellion, and I happened to be at the right place at the right time with the right state of mind. In a sense, it was my own story.”

However, Brando quickly encountered the reality of 1950s Hollywood. In the wake of the anticommunist blacklist (which devoured the careers of his mentor Stella Adler’s brother, Luther, and Brando’s own sister, Jocelyn, an actress and a supporter of various left-wing causes), the intense realism of the 1940s had become something dangerous and forbidden. He found himself performing in the mid- and late-1950s in a series of bloated, generally 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 to form his own production company and produced, directed and starred in *One-Eyed Jacks* (1961), a revenge Western, which has compelling moments.

As we noted in an obituary in 2004, Brando’s “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 asserted on one of his tapes that *Mutiny on the Bounty* “was perhaps my very worst experience in making a motion picture. I never want to do that kind of picture again as long as I live.” Certain directors, he argued, “don’t know what the process is. How delicate it is to create an emotional impression. They cover up their sense of inadequacy by being very authoritative, commanding things.” On *Mutiny*, “There was a great deal of friction, confusion and desperation, disappointment and disgust, there were fist fights.”

Brando hoped for better things with Charlie Chaplin on *A Countess From Hong Kong* (1967), but that also proved an unsatisfying experience. Released the same year, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, based on Carson McCullers, about a repressed homosexual military officer, is another muddy “psychological study,” a Southern Gothic, but at least Brando and director John Huston saw eye to eye.

Huston later told French filmmaker Bertrand Tavernier that it was

a pleasure working with Brando. I was told he was very difficult. On the contrary, he was great. He spent his time trying to deepen his character, trying to find little touches that reinforce the meaning of the film. It would take me hours to say all the good things I think of him. I think he’s the best actor I’ve ever worked with.

And Huston had worked with Humphrey Bogart, Walter Huston, Edward G. Robinson, Sterling Hayden, Jose Ferrer, John Garfield, Gregory Peck, Clark Gable, Montgomery Clift, Kirk Douglas and numerous others.

“Brando has an exceptional power,” he added. “He can take a small detail and make it his own, integrating it as if it were a part of himself.”

In 1969, he featured in *Burn!* (*Queimada*), directed by Gillo Pontecorvo (*The Battle of Algiers*), as a British agent provocateur sent to encourage a slave revolt on a Caribbean island against Portuguese rule. A puppet regime emerges dependent on a British powerful sugar company, and later Brando’s character returns to brutally suppress a second revolt. *The Chase* (1966), directed by Arthur Penn, is another one of Brando’s more promising film ventures.

The last decades of Brando’s life, by which time he had grown obese, part of his revolt against his own glamorous image, were not happy ones. But then neither were they for the American cinema—or the American population. Family disaster added to his artistic woes. In 1990, his son shot and killed the boyfriend of his daughter, after she falsely asserted that the latter had abused her. “Misery has come to my house,” he painfully told the media. Brando’s daughter killed herself some years later.

To the end, he remained an enemy of official American society. He could only say about the powers that be: “They lie. Congressmen, presidents, all of them. They lie when they’re alone, they lie when they’re asleep.” We never “see faces without lies anymore, except the dead ones. They’re the true assassins, the true murderers.”

Speaking of the responsibilities of artists, Brando argued that everything “that we do should reflect the atmosphere of our lives. We’re living now

in this mad, crazy, murderous world.”

He referred on one of his tapes to

Shakespeare addressing all artists [in Hamlet’s speech to the actors]: Suit the action to the word, the word to the action. ... To hold the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time its form and pressure.

There are tragic elements to Brando’s life and career, but he set an example and a high standard of artistic and moral principle. Even many of his mistakes are fascinating and illuminating.

Given Brando’s level of artistic and social steadfastness, it doesn’t seem inappropriate to conclude with the language Mary Shelley used in regard to her husband, the poet Shelley. After his death, she referred to “the eagerness and ardour with which he was attached to the cause of human happiness and improvement.” To purify “life of its misery and its evil was the ruling passion of his soul; he dedicated to it every power of his mind.” Whatever faults he had, she continued, “ought to find extenuation among his fellows, since they prove him to be human.”



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