



SR GOES TO THE MOVIES

Brando on the Waterfront

LET ME say right off that "On the Waterfront" (Columbia) is one of the most exciting films ever made in the United States. Later on I will qualify that statement, but I want to report at the outset that there is a tremendous picture around, a film absolutely explosive in its impact on the emotions and on the motion picture as a form.

In the past several years there have been two things happening in the movies. On the one hand, Hollywood has been developing its capacity to bedazzle. The new aspect ratios and the ultimate-weapon budgets are the latest means by which the Technicolor Tintoretos have turned film into the mightiest canvas the world has ever seen. At the same time, a number of earnest toilers in the business have been aware that the Europeans made us look like popcorn peddlers when it came to showing life problems of working-class persons in their own homes and on their own streets. The other half of the Hollywood story has been a conscious effort to make contact with the living plainness of the European film image. That effort was a vain one—until now. No matter how many camera crews were sent on location to Brooklyn or New York's East Side, there was usually a synthetic flavor to the material, principally because such settings were used for manufactured stories in which violence was a major titillation.

Now Elia Kazan has moved his cameras onto the Hoboken docks and has broken through the subtle filter which has previously shielded American lenses from the harsh light of reality. And if "On the Waterfront" were not an event for this reason, it would be one because of the performance of Marlon Brando, one of the finest things any man has done on the screen.

"Waterfront" is the story of an ex-prizefighter who is the errand boy for a crooked labor leader. Johnny Friendly, union boss, has turned the docks into his personal fief, the longshoremen into his serfs. He clips their pay envelopes, lends them money at Shylock rates, orders them out on flash strikes when he sees the chance to shake down a shipper with a dockful of perishable fruit, brutally snuffs out the life of anyone who plays stool pigeon for the crime commission investigating conditions on the water-

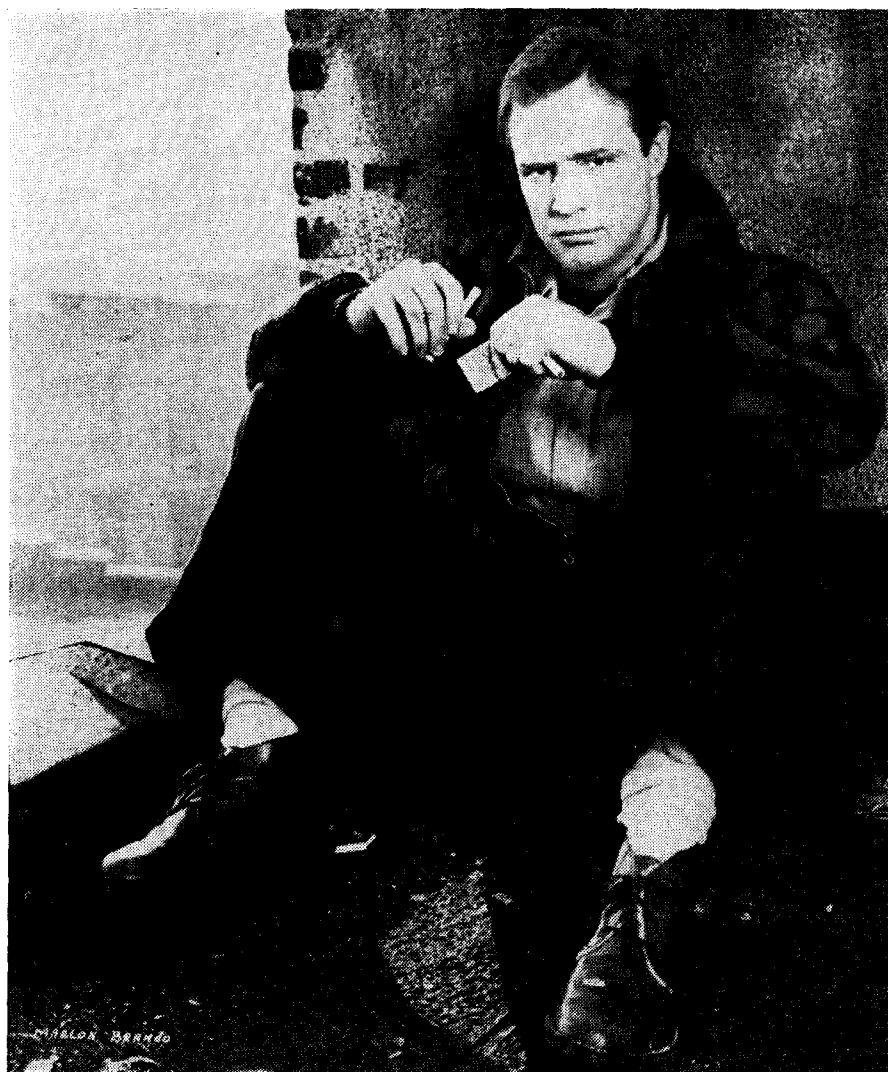
front. The background facts for Budd Schulberg's screenplay were supplied by Malcolm Johnson's prize-winning articles, and the film documents a story of peonage enforced by thugs with the acquiescence of the shippers.

In the midst of these assassins, Terry, the prizefighter, is little more than a mascot, tolerated because his educated brother is counsel for the union boss. Brando's performance in this role is a piece of genuine artistry. With half-sentences finished by body shrugs and fish gestures of the hands, with a drawn-brow groping for words, with a street arab's laugh or quick insult, with an ex-athlete's bounce to his walk, Brando projects a wonderfully absorbing portrait of a semi-

stupid, stubborn, inner-sweet young man.

Terry is not particularly troubled by his role as coffee-runner and messenger boy for the mob until one of his errands helps set up the sudden death of a neighborhood pigeon fancier who had given a statement to the crime commission. The murder becomes the occasion for the formation of a rump organization spearheaded by a militant priest and the sister of the murdered boy. The prizefighter meets the sister, takes her to a saloon, buys the parochial schoolgirl her first glass of beer, and falls in love with her in a scene that is inexpressibly sweet.

The fighter is subpoenaed by the crime commission. Johnny Friendly sends the lawyer brother to stop his mouth. The brothers have an unforgettable scene as they ride together in a taxi toward the execution headquarters. "It was you made me a bum, Charlie," says the prizefighter, and Brando's reading of this line is match-



—From "On the Waterfront."

Marlon Brando—"one of the finest things any man has done on the screen."

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less. "I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender." The lawyer, ashamed, lets his brother escape, and is murdered by the mob in his stead.

The prizefighter testifies before the crime commission and then returns to the docks, where the labor racketeer's hold over the men is eventually broken in a blood bath finale.

Kazan has served himself well in casting the film. Lee J. Cobb is effective as the labor boss. Eve Marie Saint, a television actress making her first movie appearance, is appealing as the girl, and Karl Maldin makes a forceful priest. Rod Steiger displays a brilliant understanding of the weak, easy-money, easy-power attorney who stands at the labor boss's side.

"On the Waterfront" will undoubtedly create a storm of excitement because of its use of the screen and because of Brando's vitalizing performance. I suspect that among the viewers there will be many who will find the ending somewhat pat and preachy and the plotting a bit slick. The word "slick," I am aware, is an abused word in the critic business, for slickness is part of our delight in many plays, motion pictures, and stories. But there are times when a certain easiness, a certain plot maneuvering, debases the currency of the work. This is probably the reason why "On the Waterfront" is more an electric piece of journalism than it is a drama of the first rank. But despite "Waterfront's" shortcomings, there is no doubt that a landmark in American movie-making has been established by this documentary of the docks.

—LEE ROGOW.

SR Recommends

On the Waterfront: Reviewed in this issue.

The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe: The Defoe classic as interpreted for the screen by Mexico's much-admired director Luis Bunuel, with Dan O'Herlihy as the lonely Crusoe. (SR July 17.)

Man With a Million: Mark Twain's story about a million-pound banknote, sparkingly played by Gregory Peck and an all-British supporting cast. (SR July 10.)

The Caine Mutiny: Herman Wouk's engrossing story is superbly acted by Humphrey Bogart, Jose Ferrer, Van Johnson, and Fred MacMurray—with an able assist from the U.S. Navy. (SR June 26.)

Mr. Hulot's Holiday: The sights, sounds, and inanities of a French seaside resort are caught to perfection in this satire written, directed, and starring Jacques Tati, who shows that the Chaplin-Keaton-Lloyd tradition is still gloriously alive. (SR June 19.)

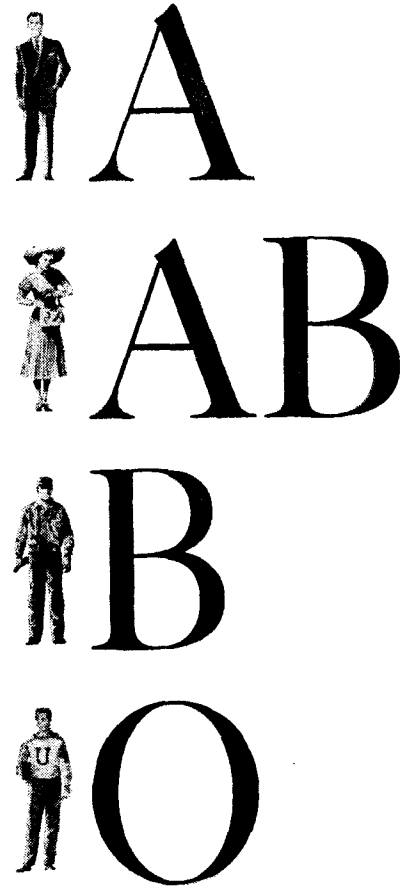
The Unconquered: This full-length documentary biography of Helen Keller is a remarkable portrait of a remarkable woman—and it's a far cry from the fictionalized biographical extravaganzas that have been issuing from Hollywood lately. (SR June 12.)

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