



Movie Club

On The Waterfront (1954)

1. The film was inspired by a newspaper expose on the corruption of unions in the New York docks. Adding to this, it is also somewhat of an autobiography of director, Elia Kazan. Kazan is reflected in the lead character, Terry (played by Marlon Brando). Just as Terry rats his friends out, Kazan informed authorities of his communist friends (an ex-communist himself for a short period of time), however, rather than being praised for speaking out, he was cast out of the American film circle. The film therefore represents Kazan's interpretation of the ideal outcome of which he never received. The film also serves as a justification for his actions. Therefore the context surrounding the film interplays directly into the storyline. Do you think the film's success hinges on this context and adds to the realism of the film?

"...Kazan, more than most directors of the fifties, was overly concerned with political themes, while at the same time his own life was crucially affected by his appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee as a 'friendly witness' in 1952...After selling out his friends on the left and enthusiastically joining the fifties crusade against communism, he was cast out of the mainstream of American film history..." (Biskind, P 1975, 'The Politics of Power in "On the Waterfront"', Film Quarterly, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 25-38.)

2. The entire movie was filmed on location in Hoboken, New Jersey in a short 36 days and on a minimal budget. The result of this was a realistic and harsh representation (reminiscent of *film noir*) that became at once critically acclaimed, winning multiple Academy Awards. How do you think the realistic interpretation affects the impact of the film?

Kazan states in his autobiography, "The bite of the wind did a great thing for the actors' faces: it made them look like people, not actors—in fact, like people who lived in Hoboken and suffered the cold because they had no choice." (Bromwich, D 1996, 'Brando and on the Waterfront', The Threepenny Review, no. 65, pp. 19-21.)

3. The film follows a very traditional plot structure in that it ends with the protagonist (Terry Malloy) succeeding against all odds. Terry succeeds in his quest to overthrow the union bosses and in doing so he fulfils the traditional character archetype of 'the hero'. Does this counter-act the realistic and gritty nature of the film? Does the film stray from realism in this sense, i.e. do we believe that Terry would actually succeed in his quest?
4. The pigeon's in the film act as a symbolic token for the dockworkers. The pigeon dockworkers are pinned against the thug union hawks. There are multiple times in the film when this symbolism is reinforced. What do you make of this symbolism?

"You know this city's full of hawks? That's a fact. They hang around on the top of the big hotels. And they spot a pigeon in the park. Right down on him."

5. The film is a classic underdog story that has clear agendas both politically (in relation to communism, unions and power), and personally (in relation to Kazan and justifying his real-life actions of whistleblowing on his friends). Because the film does have this deeply ingrained time-specific context, do you think the story is relevant to a contemporary audience? Consider this quote by Terry Malloy, could this line appear in a contemporary film?

"You don't understand. I could've had class. I could've been a contender. I could've been somebody instead of a bum, which I am." Terry Malloy.