On the Waterfront looms so large as a cultural artifact that any appraisal of it is daunting. How does one begin to assess a landmark of American cinema that is also a trapped-in-amber reminder of a troubling era in the nation’s political history, as well as the film that signaled the advent of a wholly new approach to acting?

Fortunately here at the Sentinel, we keep things simple. Is On the Waterfront noir? No.

True confession time: Waterfront is one of those classics that I respect more than like. I blame the Actors Studio. The Method school of performance it touted as the apex of emotional realism now reads as stylization of a different kind. Aside from some ferocious muckraking moments, the film crowned Best Picture of 1954 doesn’t speak to me. Three years earlier, Columbia Pictures released another film about harborside corruption. The Mob (ironically made with the working title Waterfront) is a sharp-elbowed racketeering exposé with a crackling script by William Bowers. If you’ll permit a little blasphemy, your correspondent prefers it to Waterfront. It’s faster, funnier, more suspenseful, less ... psychological. In it a young Charles Bronson slams the degrading and tainted shape-up system of hiring longshoremen, but does so amidst corkscrew plot twists and wise-guy dialogue.

True noir has no agenda other than to whisper in our ears that not only are we all doomed but destined to die unfulfilled, that at best we’ll go out with swag within arm’s reach and the lover for whom we stole it pulling the trigger. Not so On the Waterfront. It has points to make. It’s an issue drama in noir threads, a sheep in wolf’s clothing.

After Waterfront’s overwhelming success, Columbia essentially buried The Mob. Only now is the earlier film emerging from Waterfront’s shadow to be viewed on its own merits. Putting a hit on another movie – that’s truly noir, as is so much of On the Waterfront’s history.

Newspaperman Malcolm “Mike” Johnson’s 24 front-page “Crime on the Waterfront” articles ran in the New York Sun in November and December of 1948. This reportage – eventual adaptor Budd Schulberg called it a j’accuse, saying “series” is far too mild a word for it – laid bare the stranglehold that organized crime had on the labor unions of the city’s harbor, outlining a tangled web of graft and murder. Johnson’s articles, written with righteous indignation and an eye for detail that kept straphangers riveted, introduced many readers to figures who would become part of 20th century criminal lore: Charles (Lucky) Luciano, Frank Costello, Meyer Lansky. They would net Johnson a Pulitzer Prize and a smear campaign branding him a Communist.

Meanwhile, director Elia Kazan was developing a similarly-themed script with playwright Arthur Miller. The Hook was to be about labor organizing among dock workers in Brooklyn. Columbia wanted the story altered so that Communists rather than gangsters posed the threat. Miller instead chose to abandon the film. The decision contributed to a falling out with Kazan, who would later appear volun-
Kazan directs Brando on location

Waterfront is pure noir, however, every second that Terry’s big brother is onscreen. Charley the Gent (Rod Steiger), low-rent consigliere to Johnny Friendly (Lee J. Cobb), poor battered Terry goes beyond the neighborhood’s “D&D” attitude—“deaf and dumb”—toward the corrupt system that holds sway on the harbor. He’s only dimly aware of the scope of the Mob’s crimes, enough to be a threat to the syndicate but not so bent the audience can’t embrace him. Consider his constant protests once he understands that he was used to lure Joey Doyle to his death: “I thought they were gonna talk to him … I thought the worst they were gonna do was maybe lean on him a little bit.” Terry’s punchiness elevates him to the level of an innocent.

Terry isn’t tempted by a femme fatale, but a person even more pure than he is. Edie Doyle, Joey’s grieving little sister, is played by Eva Marie Saint in her film debut. Her need to learn who killed her brother makes Terry question the life he’s never given much thought to before. It’s this love story, heartfelt though it is, that bogs the film down for me. The blossoming relationship between the virginal schoolgirl and the saintly palooka is idealized to a fault, at once implausible and calculated.

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Waterfront is pure noir, however, every second that Terry’s big brother is onscreen. Charley the Gent (Rod Steiger), low-rent consigliere to Johnny Friendly, knows exactly what he and his cohorts are doing and the toll it’s taking on their fellow man. Watch a lifetime of guilt and regret seep out of him like sap from a spiked tree during that famous cab ride. Charley tries to intimidate Terry at the point of a gun, but the kid’s more hurt than scared. “You was my brother, Charley. You should of looked out for me a little bit.” Steiger, an actor whose histrionics can be unbearable, has never been better. Maybe because he had real world experience in perspective.” It also reveals Schuberg’s true allegiance; Father Barry, the crusading priest played by Karl Malden and inspired by real-life reformer the Reverend John M. Corridan, is allowed “to share the action with Terry and to dominate the thinking of the book … the violent action line of Terry Malloy is now seen for what it is, one of the many moral crises in the spiritual and social development of Father Barry.” And its tone is considerably grimmer. There is no triumphant march into the warehouse. Terry Malloy is brutally murdered, his “lame-mutilated corpse … never identified. But the boys along River Street, pro mob and anti, knew they had seen the last of a pretty tough kid.” Father Barry is left facing the prospect of transfer to a parish where he can be easily muzzled. The novel is at times too strenuously naturalistic and overindulges Schuberg’s penchant for dialect (“I got a poindant groove in m’shoul-der from too many years of bananers”), but it’s far more clear-eyed. Change is coming to the waterfront, but over time and only at the expense of brave men’s lives.

Any discussion of On the Waterfront must address its politics—whatever they may be. It’s difficult to avoid viewing the movie through the prism of its makers’ actions during theHUAC witch hunts. Is it an apologia for informing? Kazan endorsed that interpretation, saying, “On The Waterfront was my own story. Every day I worked on that film I was telling the world where I stood and my critics to go and fuck themselves.” He felt “what made the film strong” was “I did not duck the par-allel, I admitted it and stressed it.” Years later, though, the director opined that any comparison between Terry’s predicament and his own “falls short. I always felt my sit-uation had values on both sides (while) the issue in the film is terribly clear.” For a movie not explicitly about the blacklist, Waterfront has had a lengthy afterlife as one that frames the issues of that shameful chapter of Holly-wood history. Kazan, in exploring if not obliquely justified his behavior, has guaranteed that generations of people spared the hard choices that confronted him will forever probe his motivations. There’s something very noir about that.

On the Waterfront waters down the strong stuff for public consumption. It raises tough questions only to offer reassuring answers. True love blooms in desolation, the good guys always win. Maybe it’s not noir. The world that spawned it was noir enough.