



Elia Kazan

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Nearing his eightieth year, Elia Kazan has given sharp focus to many of the intriguing personalities of his time: Arthur Miller, Marilyn Monroe, Lee Strasberg, Marlon Brando, James Dean, John Steinbeck, and many other important figures from motion pictures, the stage, and literature. New information comes to light about Monroe's early career--particularly the way her mentors abused her and made her sense of self-worth (already shaky) weaker. Arthur Miller is "Art," so that Kazan can show how his friendship with the playwright influenced their creative work together. Kazan acknowledges Strasberg's important role in the Group Theatre but also reveals the acting teacher's vanity and self-serving ambition.

Kazan is unsparing about himself, noting his unfaithfulness to his wives and his unrelenting pursuit of other women. He is unapologetic about his decision to "name names": He identified some of his friends as Communist Party members or fellow travelers because he no longer believed in Communism and could not abide the air of secrecy that protected the Party. He admits he wanted to continue his career as a film director and to avoid the blacklist. He lost friends because of his role as informer but does not regret his testimony before the House Committee on UnAmerican Activities (HUAC). But Kazan is no absolutist; what was right for him was not necessarily right for others. He believes that Clifford Odets should not have cooperated with HUAC. Doing so destroyed the playwright's integrity, his sense of himself as a radical and as a just man.

Although Kazan's autobiography can be attacked as self-serving, it is remarkable for its depth and thoroughness. It presents quite a contrast to the memoirs of his contemporaries--writers such as Lillian Hellman, who prefer the sketchier form of the memoir which allows them to dwell on only certain episodes, thus saving considerable embarrassment and explanation. What Kazan's long memoir lacks in economy it more than makes up for in its comprehensive treatment of his life.

Sources for Further Study

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