

“ON THE WATERFRONT”[1954, directed by Elia Kazan [AA for Academy Award], written by Budd Schulberg [AA], and starring Marlon Brando [AA]. Eva Marie Saint won an AA for supporting actress in her first film, and the film won eight Oscars in all, including Best Picture, and was nominated for at least twelve. This is one of the most famous movies of all time and has one of the most famous scenes, the one in the taxi with Terry [Brando] and his brother Charlie, played by Rod Steiger. Leonard Bernstein was nominated for the music, which has some of the themes that show up just a few years later when his “West Side Story” was first performed. Lee J. Cobb, who plays Johnny Friendly, was the original Willy Loman in Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman” on Broadway in 1949.

The film is set in Hoboken, New Jersey, just across the river from Manhattan, and a city that was just behind NYC in the number of residents lost on Sept. 11. When the movie was filmed, it was a gritty port city, heavily Irish, although also known as the hometown of Frank Sinatra. Lately, it has become partly gentrified, in part because of the easy commute by “tube” to Manhattan. In the 1950s, it had freight piers and was also where passengers for Europe got on ships of the Holland American Line, some of which can be seen in the film.

When the film was first released, it was noted that Kazan, Schulberg, and Cobb had been so-called “friendly witnesses” in the communist-hunting investigations of the later 1940s and early 1950s, in that they had named American communists [or people on the left] they had associated with earlier. So, some critics said that the film was at least in part a justification for snitching. This is still a controversial subject. The film also has a mixed message on labor unions. Small note: The “gang” kid on the roof grew up to be the head of a longshoremen’s union in New Jersey.

What does one of the longshoremen mean when he says their world is not part of America? Is this not the 1950s, a decade perceived by some with a lot of nostalgia? Note that the film came out in 1954, the same year as the Brown Supreme Court case on racial segregation. When Terry talks about being a “contender,” does he mean only as a boxer? Is there some hint of being a strong individual or of social mobility? What are the expectations of the people on the docks? How do they look at their lives, at women, at the church? Do they have any faith in the rule of law, supposedly a key value in American society? Why do the other longshoremen not help Terry when he is being beaten? Where does the not-very-bright Terry get the idea that he has ethical obligations that seem to have escaped his smarter brother and that might mean putting “right” ahead of family? Why would Edie, who has a chance for a better life, get involved with Terry? Is Terry’s courage likely to have long-term consequences? It is easy to see parts of the film as dated. Is it a significant weakness that, having been made in the 1950s, there cannot be four-letter words or explicit sex?