

## Marlon Brando – Careless Genius

*first published in 2006*

The names of most actors, be they Charlton Heston or Geoffrey Palmer, normally bring with the mention a clear and singular image. But Brando could hardly be contained within one thought. Of what does one think? The confident, youthful Marc Antony? The iconic motorcycle rebel from *The Wild Ones*? The puffy-cheeked Godfather? The shaven-headed Colonel Kurtz? Each of these images has found its way to us with equal force. The fact that he underwent at least four almost complete transformations of appearance over the years does not help us to remember he really was just one man.

And there are sadder images of him as well, most notably the bloated, rasping hermit he became in later years. This was a sight we were spared for most of the time, but occasionally alimony would demand that he rouse himself from his Tahitian retreat and mumble his way through confused and confusing performances. Any billionaire philanthropist of the arts worth his or her salt should have paid Brando not to appear in these, an act morally equivalent to preventing one's aged and bewildered relative wandering the streets at night. His career from the late 70's described a downward arc almost as impressive as that of his famous nose. How could the quality of his work dive so spectacularly?

The first and most obvious thing to point out is that Brando was a truly brilliant actor, one of the best film actors by any common understanding of such terms. Something else to point out, however, is that he was also an extremely intelligent and articulate man. As such he was working in exactly the wrong medium. Anyone with sensitivity, intellect or subtlety is destined to come a cropper in Tinseltown. Almost everything Hollywood is great at is a science rather than an art.

Brando initially made films that he thought would be challenging, both to audiences and to himself. But he was rarely able to find sufficient intellectual nutrients in a part to sustain his curiosity and eagerness. Gradually the vapidness of making silly films wore away at him and before long this began to affect both the quality of his work and his attitude towards it. He became difficult, then truculent, then impossible. He openly sneered at the work he was obliged to do and would sometimes deliberately do bad work to sabotage projects.

This was unnecessarily cruel of him and seems to have been borne of a terrible indolence and exhaustion that overtook him midway through his working life. But Hollywood was only doing to Brando what Brando had been doing to Hollywood. It was ever a marriage of convenience but in its happy heyday neither party was really conscious of this. Had he been desperate to produce beautiful and meaningful work he could, after all, have returned to the stage and appeared in any play that took his fancy. But long-term hunger has

a way of diminishing the appetite and after a while he could no longer connect with his early desires. Besides, who could turn down the sort of money that Brando was being offered a few years into his film career? Certainly not Brando himself who, with cheques increasing and satisfaction waning, became a notorious clock-watcher.

The stories of his cavalier attitude are legion. As Don Corleone in *The Godfather* he grieved over the dead body of his son whilst still holding his Chinese takeaway just out of shot. He spun an elaborate philosophical theory of narrative to Francis Ford Coppola in order to convince him to reduce his work on *Apocalypse Now* down to a couple of 45 minute filming sessions. His attempts to artistically justify the 'innovation' of his secretary reciting his lines into his earpiece for him to repeat rather than having to learn them fooled no-one. There could only be one reason for this bizarre practice; laziness. The time he was allowed to finish work each day was of greater importance to him than his life's work or his legacy.

But there was a frail and lonely sadness to the vestiges of his professional dignity. As decline set in he refused to read scripts before accepting parts since he knew they would probably stink and if they did he might be tempted to turn them down, something he could ill afford to do. Brando once said that if the studio paid him as much to sweep the floor as it paid him to act he would sweep the floor. His interest in acting was almost exactly zero. His distraught publishers had to beg him to include some mention of his acting career in his memoirs and he eventually did so with neither length nor depth.

His own cash cow may still have been lactating after many of its peers had dried up, but nothing lasts forever. (He was relatively lucky, however – at least he was born the right gender. It's difficult to think of an ageing, spreading actress who could have matched Brando's Jor-El by getting \$10 million for playing Superman's mother.) Hollywood seems to have tolerated Brando's quixotic demands for a while and then one day simply stopped phoning him. The turning point was of course the very second he ceased to be a profitable entity for them. This suited Brando just fine – in that he was indifferent to it if he noticed it at all – but eventually his money ran out and then he had to start selling his dignity in a marketplace whose inflation rate increasingly resembled that of the Weimar Republic. Here began the long, slow ramble to cynicism and obesity, flogging the family silver that was the last strands of his talent whenever opportunity allowed it.

The intellectual finesse of, say, a Martin Scorsese who openly admits to a policy of 'one for me and one for you' in his collaborations with studios was beyond Brando. He had simply given up and took neither pride nor pleasure in his achievements past or present.

Not all Brando's problems can be blamed on Hollywood, however. Much of his tragedy lay in the fact that his prodigious abilities came too easily to him. His talent was incidental and, indeed, accidental – he did not work for it and he did not work on it; it was simply given to him. And never having had to work

for it, Brando had no way of knowing its value. By sheer chance he had a phenomenal ability and he slowly squandered that magnificent inheritance through profligacy and lack of interest.

But should he have been interested in, let alone committed to, acting simply because he happened to be better than everyone else at it? The world's tallest man might after a few years become tired of appearing on talk shows and opening supermarkets all in the name of an attribute hardly of his choosing and which he is, perhaps, trying to live his life away from the presence of. And how is it different for Brando? If he wanted to be simply an island-owner lying in the sun all day who are we to begrudge him this?

The answer is we are his fellow human beings. He impoverished us all by his latter ennui and, just as we had a responsibility to ensure he was treated with dignity, so he too had a duty to use to the best of his strength the God-given greatness that was uniquely vested in him. He had the potential to make millions happy and fulfilled in a way that almost none of us will ever have, and he just couldn't be bothered. He preferred to concentrate on his own happiness. Which didn't actually make him particularly happy.

There is a moment in *Last Tango In Paris* in which the grey-haired Brando, playfully languishing in the lovenest, suddenly leaps heels over head in a stunning acrobatic display of agility and strength. He lands nimbly on his feet. This is the glimpse par excellence of what Brando was capable of. When he felt like being capable of it.

Kieron Barry  
11 February 2006