



San Diego Politics A La Kazan

Legendary film director Elia Kazan died this week at age 95. He was one of those vexing sorts—a reminder that big lives do not fit within tightly drawn comfort zones.

The characters in his films and books struggled with internal demons, sorting out rights and wrongs in a distinctly drawling American vernacular that seems quaint in today's simplified message driven political climate.

Who could forget Marlon Brando's agonizing redemptive crawl across the docks at the end of *On the Waterfront*? It should be required viewing for ambitious young politicians within and surrounding government.

Kazan was also a weasel, turning in friends to the House Un-American Activities Committee on demand in 1952. Playwright Arthur Miller, a long time friend, said in a 2000 article published in *The Guardian* "...it swept over me that, had I been one of his comrades, he would have spent my name as part of the guarantee of his reform."

On The Waterfront has been widely described as Kazan's big fat rationalization for driving eight people into economic and professional ruin because they spent time as Socialists or Communists in the 1930's. The film's antihero, coerced into playing ball with vermin so he could work, finally rats on corrupt union officials who in turn beat him to a pulp.

It was also undeniably great art. Forget the deconstructionist biographical interpretations. When the loser stevedore drags his battered Brando-in-his-hunk-period body to the feet of the union boss in defiance, a lone stand against corruption from the bottom up triumphed in a disquieting movie moment.

Kazan maintained that he had good reason, besides making sure he could continue creating American film classics, to blab at Joseph McCarthy's inquisition—he hated Josef Stalin as would any rational person.

He also thought political organizations should conduct business under the light of day instead of in the corners of dark alleys. American Communist cells even in the 1930's, though attractive to idealistic intellectuals, were not exactly fertile grounds for diverse open-air discussion.

Whether all this was an after created defense or an expression of core beliefs we will never know. Higher principles beyond pragmatic politics were not part of the thinking that led to his appearance at HUAC.

While surviving McCarthyism professionally, he was personally shunned. Forty-five years after he named names, a painfully subdued and conflicted audience of actors shaped by Kazan and his Actors Studio sullenly witnessed the presentation of a special Academy Award to him.

Complicity in a witch hunt made Kazan a warlock into eternity. He was clear that if he had to choose between his ability to work and protecting people whose beliefs he did not agree with, the work won the day.

In today's "what about me world," Kazan's explanations ring truer than in times when moral decisions were made with a view to higher principle.

Most who stood up to McCarthy did so with the belief that freedom of expression and association without government coercion were among America's highest virtues. Some went to jail. Some could not find work under their own names for years. Some died in obscurity.

Watching a new generation of political operatives treading moral water in a sea of confused values has not produced many golden moments.

In one tarnished incident, last week a young City Council staffer assigned as the liaison to the Torrey Hills Planning Board for the past several years, took a new job with a lobbyist representing the community's master developer and commercial property owners who have been trying to build a controversial office and biotechnology complex in Torrey Hills.

There is nothing illegal in his behavior, nor does the move break the city's "revolving door" ethics rules because the PR firm says he will not conduct business with the city for at least the year required by law.

But, it was Kazan styled self-interest in its modern form. The incident wove an even darker web of distrust around an already strained relationship between the Council office and the Torrey Hills community.

This was posted on a community website by one angry planning board member who described the staffer's last year as a lengthy job interview: "...the real concern is that in order to secure this "plum" job he "sold-out" Scott Peters' constituents in the process."

Kazan once wrote about his McCarthy expedition: "What I'd done was correct, but was it right?"