

Justin Minnich

Final Essay

Professor Watson

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"I Coulda Been a Contender"

Many people consider the film *On the Waterfront* to be one of the best films of all time. The movie was released in 1954 by the director Elia Kazan. It stars a young and upcoming actor Marlon Brando, who would change the acting world. One of the most famous scenes from *On the Waterfront* is when Brando's character, Terry, and his brother are in the back of a car discussing some business. Charlie, who is Terry's brother, was told by the "bosses" of their gang to keep his mouth shut about the murder of Terry's girlfriend's brother. Charlie tells Terry to take a job or the "bosses" will come after him. Charlie pulls a gun on his brother in the back seat, and Terry is in disbelief. He cannot believe that his own brother would turn against him like this. Terry then goes on talking about his boxing days and how his brother, Charlie, ruined his chance at a title shot. He says a very famous quote "You don't understand I could have had class. I coulda been a contender." (Kazan) Charlie realizes that what he has done is wrong and says he will tell the bosses that he could not find Terry. This scene is very moving. The scene is very dramatic with great costumes, movement, sounds, and acting from one of the best actors of all time.

In this scene costumes play a big role. It is clear that Charlie has a larger income than that of Terry. Charlie is dressed in a very nice looking coat. He also is wearing a top hat and holding a pair of gloves in the scene, while Terry is wearing an old baggy flannelled shirt. (Gian-

netti 327) It is clear that Charlie has more income and thus, is more important in the gang. They are both wearing some form of checkers. Charlie's scarf is checkered, and Terry's shirt is a checkered pattern. The director was probably trying to show the relationship between the two brothers, having the checkers represent their family. It seems as if Charlie is dressed for a business trip. He is relatively high up in the gang and was asked to do a job for the "bosses". This is why he has a nice looking coat on with a top hat and gloves. Terry costume looks as if he is just going to hang out with his brother, which is what he expected. Throughout the whole movie Terry is wearing the same outfit. This could be referring to when Terry said he "could have had class". If his brother would have let him win the boxing title instead of betting against him Terry would have money and class. Therefore, he would be dressed in nicer outfits. Terry's poor looking outfits constantly remind the audience that he could have been a somebody, but instead he has nothing.

This scene is shot in a tightly framed shot. The two characters are sitting in the back seat of a car. They both are using some hand gestures, but for the most part they just sit there. The filmmaker does not want to use a whole lot of movements when in a medium shot or close shot, which is what this scene is. (Giannetti 104) The camera uses a 180 degree movement. It goes from one side of the vehicle to the other side when they are talking. When Charlie pulls the gun on Terry, Charlie leans over Terry kind of empowering him. Terry stays very calm during this scene and knows that his brother would never shoot him. He gently pushes the gun away from him. This shows their relationship and Terry knowing that his brother could never shoot him. Throughout the first part of the scene Terry is slouched down in the seat and seems very comfortable. Charlie is very uptight and seems as if he is nervous. Surely, that is what the

director was trying to go for, Charlie being uptight because he was asked to do something he is not comfortable doing. When Terry first gets in the car Charlie cannot stop fidgeting. This also shows his nervousness. At the end of the scene Charlie is also slouched and seems to be in disbelief that he would do something like that to his own brother. The only time that Charlie and Terry come in contact with one another is when Terry says “you were my brother” and he taps Charlie on the chest. Their touching when he says “brother” show their relationship. Their proxemics pattern is personal because they are within reaching distance in the car. It is pretty obvious that the car itself is not moving. If the car would have been moving the characters would have been bumped around a little bit, especially because there were no seat belts back in those days. The director does show the street lights coming and going inside of the car to make it appear as if the car were in motion. The movement of the car would have made this scene a little bit more believable; however it is still a marvelous scene.

The sounds in this scene really capture the moment. The audience starts out only hearing the engine of the car and the passing of other cars. The tones of the voices are relatively calm at the beginning of the scene. Charlie starts to raise his voice at Terry when Terry turns down the job. Charlie sounds very uneasy. Charlie yells out “437 River St.” Terry knows something about that address that the audience can only assume that, that is where they take people they want to get rid of. There is a sound montage with some mickeymousing in the scene. (Giannetti 220) Charlie is yelling at Terry he says “what the hell” just as Charlie says “hell” the audience hears a car horn. Throughout the entire scene the audience can sense the relationship between the two brothers. The actors do a great job at getting the audience feel their passion and loving relationship between family. Just after Terry puts his gun away, an orchestra of

instruments starts to play in the background. The music makes the audience feel the tension within the car. It also makes the audience think that something bad still may happen. Is Charlie going to shoot Terry? Is Charlie going to shoot himself? The music does an outstanding job keeping the audience guessing. When Terry starts to tell the story of his boxing days and how Charlie turned on him, the music is sad and somber. This could be focusing on the end of their relationship because Charlie is about to die. Terry also seems heartbroken and very upset that his own brother turned on him. The sounds in this scene are very moving and the dialogue is just right.

Marlon Brando is the star of this movie and does a fantastic job in this scene. Brando is considered to be a method actor because he would have often not follow the dialogue written for him, and create his own lines. Sometimes this would cause long breaks or even mumbling from him. It seemed to work out for him and Elia Kazan loved him for that. Kazan calls Brando a genius. Brando was an actor star. He liked to take on several different roles and challenge himself. Brando was also not interested in the fame and glamour of Hollywood. He is one of few actors who went from Hollywood to Broadway. For his role as Terry in *On the Waterfront*, he won his first Oscar for Best Actor ("On the Waterfront"). It is very evident as to why Brando won Best Actor in this scene. He is very emotionally powerful, tender, and poetic in this scene (Giannetti 285). His quote in this scene "I coulda been a contender" is one of the most famous movie quotes of all time. Brando does a perfect job reciting this line. He makes the audience really feel in his pain and suffering. From this film and many others Marlon Brando is considered to be one of the best actors of all time.

The scene in the back seat of the taxi is one of the best scenes of all time. It has great costume design which really engages an experienced film watcher. The movement of the characters and the camera are spot on. The whole scene is very convincing and realistic while still closed. Sounds can play a big key in movies and keep the audience on the edge of their seats, which is exactly what the sound in this scene does. Marlon Brando plays a great character in Terry. He is a rough kid who is still so tender and soft hearted. In the end Charlie ends up being killed because Terry does not want to do what the "bosses" say. Terry feels terrible that his brother was killed and seeks out revenge. He tries to take on the whole gang, but gets beaten. In the end Terry has the last laugh because he gains the respect of all the people from the dockyard. This film is one of the greatest films of all time for several of these reasons.

Works Cited

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