

Question of Honor

A special Oscar for director Elia Kazan brings his bitter critics back to the barricades

As a moviemaker, Elia Kazan made his reputation as the director of such Hollywood classics as *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *On the Waterfront*. But for half a century his creative legacy has been shadowed by what many still see as an unforgivable political act: In 1952, Kazan chose to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee,



Rod Steiger (with Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*) was shocked that Kazan turned informant.

naming at least eight of his friends as Communists—thus preserving his film career while ruining most of theirs. Actor Rod Steiger, who once idolized Kazan and rose to fame for his role as Marlon Brando's brother Charley in *Waterfront*, can still scarcely contain his bitterness over what he considers a betrayal—though it did not affect him personally. “I don't think that time excuses the crime,” says Steiger, 73. “Nobody was supposed to destroy someone else for their own ambition.”

All that rancor may come to a head on March 21, when Kazan, now 89 and in frail health, is due to receive a Lifetime Achievement Oscar at this year's Academy Awards. In fact, his accomplishments as actor and director are largely unchallenged. But for many Hollywood veterans, the Kazan performance they remember most vividly is the one he gave in April 1952, when he disclosed that he



“There was a [Communist] conspiracy,” Kazan (in 1989) has said. “I was in it.”



JOHN SPILLNER/CORBIS

Karl Malden (with Vivien Leigh in *Streetcar*) lobbied for the special Oscar.



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Kazan (left) directed Warren Beatty and Natalie Wood in 1961's *Splendor in the Grass*.

and his colleagues from the Group Theatre in New York City—including writer Clifford Odets and actress Paula Strasberg—had once been members of the Communist Party. The ensuing blacklisting of many of those named, which made it virtually impossible for them to get work in the movie business,

sparked outrage that flared again when the Academy voted on Jan. 7 to bestow its special Oscar on him. Though he was not among those fingered by Kazan, Bernard Gordon, 80, a former blacklisted screenwriter, has vowed to organize a protest outside the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. And in what may provide a moment of high drama, Gordon has asked that audience members withhold their applause when Kazan makes his appearance. "Maybe God can forgive [him], but I can't," he says.

One thing almost everyone agrees on is Kazan's artistic genius. "You can't deny that he was a brilliant director," says Karl Kraber, a college music teacher whose father, Tony, a CBS executive, was named by Kazan and subsequently blacklisted. Nevertheless, Kraber opposes the special Oscar: "This is not something you can forgive and forget," he maintains. But

actor Karl Malden, who won a Best Supporting Actor Oscar for his role as Mitch in *Streetcar*, lobbied the Academy board passionately to bestow the award. "There's no place for politics in any art form," Malden told the *Los Angeles Times*. "If that's the way he chose to get out of a problem

... who are we to judge?" In the end, the board evidently agreed, voting unanimously in favor.

While other Hollywood figures—notably actors Lee J. Cobb and Burl Ives—named names, none has come in for so much hostility over the years as Kazan. That is perhaps because he

is one of the few who have never apologized—though he did express his regrets in a series of interviews taped privately some 25 years ago by California writer and former movie executive Jeff Young. Next month, after keeping the tapes to himself, Young will publish them in book form. "Maybe I did wrong—probably did," Kazan conceded to Young. "Anyone who informs on other people is doing something disturbing and even disgusting. It doesn't sit well on anyone's conscience."

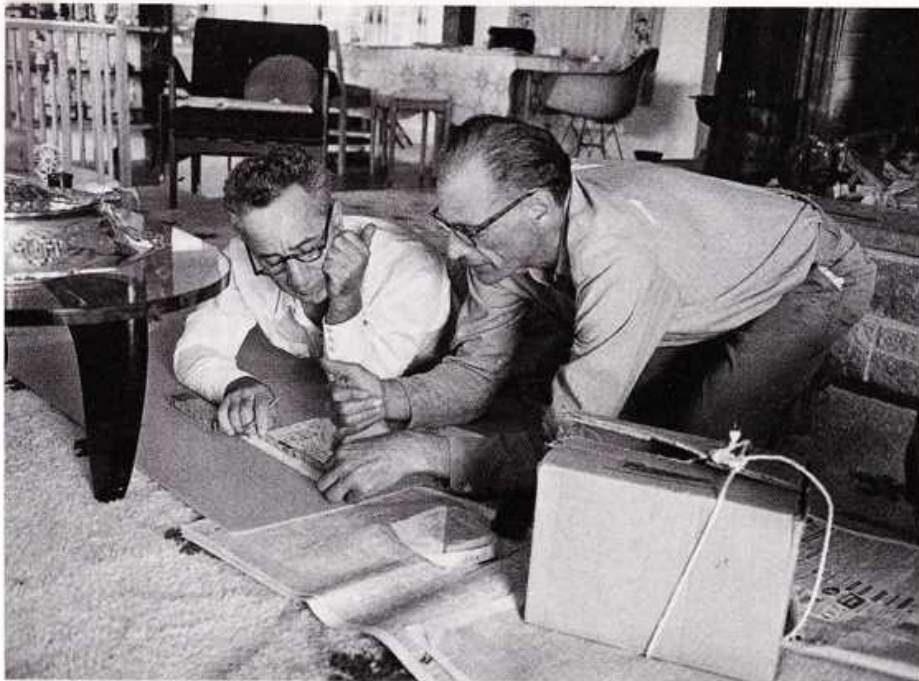
All the same, Kazan argued, the Communist activities of his friends were already known to authorities. And in any case, he said, he had no choice but to do what he did, since in 1952 Communism posed a profound threat to the U.S. "There was a conspiracy," he told Young, whose uncle, writer Ned Young, was blacklisted and whose aunt committed suicide in despair. "I



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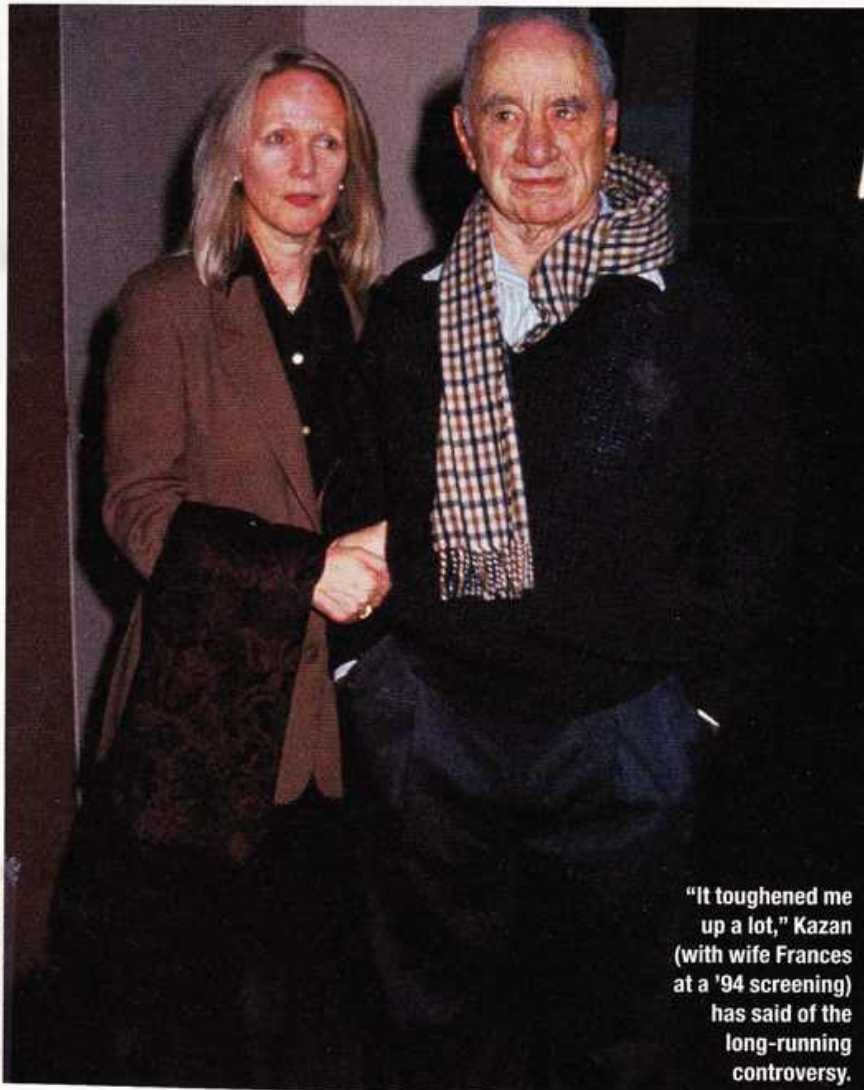
Steiger (at home in Malibu) opposes the award to Kazan.

● controversy



Also an acclaimed theater director, Kazan worked with Arthur Miller (right) in 1963.

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"It toughened me up a lot," Kazan (with wife Frances at a '94 screening) has said of the long-running controversy.

thought I would be doing a terrible thing to pretend ignorance."

To his critics, though, Kazan was simply trying to save his own skin. And people like Karl Kraber scoff at the notion that a small number of screenwriters and broadcasters represented a dangerous fifth column. "Even if he'd wanted to," says Kraber, "the very idea that my father could slip any Communist propaganda past his bosses at CBS was ludicrous." Kraber says his father, who died in 1986 at age 81, refused to cooperate with HUAC and found it nearly impossible to get work, except in the Broadway theater, where the blacklist was widely ignored. "It was sad to see him so depressed, even though we were all proud of the stand he'd taken," says Kraber. "He had a lot of trouble trying to put his life back together."

To be sure, Kazan did not emerge unscathed himself. Some friends shunned him. Production of *On the Waterfront* was nearing completion when Steiger learned of Kazan's testimony. From that time on, Steiger could no longer look the director in the eye and after the movie wrapped never spoke to him again. "He was really like a father figure to all of us," says Steiger. "I was crushed."

How Kazan, who declined an interview, sees the current controversy is an open question. In the past he has professed to be indifferent about what others think of him, good or bad. "I've had so much praise in my life. Some of it deserved, some of it not deserved," he told *The New York Times* in 1997. "What does it matter?" It is not known whether the ailing director, who lives in New York City with his third wife, Frances, will even touch on the issue in his acceptance speech. But if he does, he may choose to echo the sentiments of playwright Arthur Miller, who himself suffered during the blacklisting, and who recently wrote in support of the award to Kazan. "Perhaps all one can hope for," Miller said, "is to find in one's heart praise for what a man has done well and censure for where he has tragically failed."

- Bill Hewitt
- Irene Zutell in Los Angeles, Anne Lang in Austin, Texas, and Natasha Stoyloff in New York City

