



Elia Kazan: A Biography

By Richard Schickel

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Few figures in film and theater history tower like Elia Kazan. Born in 1909 to Greek parents in Istanbul, Turkey, he arrived in America with incomparable vision and drive, and by the 1950s he was the most important and influential director in the nation, simultaneously dominating both theater and film. His productions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Death of a Salesman* reshaped the values of the stage. His films -- most notably *On the Waterfront* -- brought a new realism and a new intensity of performance to the movies. Kazan's career spanned times of enormous change in his adopted country, and his work affiliated him with many of America's great artistic moments and figures, from New York City's Group Theatre of the 1930s to the rebellious forefront of 1950s Hollywood; from Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracy to Marlon Brando and James Dean.

Ebullient and secretive, bold and self-doubting, beloved yet reviled for "naming names" before the House Un-American Activities Committee, Kazan was an individual as complex and fascinating as any he directed. He has long deserved a biography as shrewd and sympathetic as this one.

In the electrifying **Elia Kazan**, noted film historian and critic **Richard Schickel** illuminates much more than a single astonishing life and life's work: He pays discerning tribute to the power of theater and film, and casts a new light on six crucial decades of American history.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

When the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences decided to give Kazan (1909–2003) an honorary Oscar in 1999, it rekindled the lingering resentment over his testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee nearly 50 years earlier. Schickel, who produced a short film for the Academy's presentation and covered the controversy in his role as *Time*'s movie critic, has virtually no sympathy for Kazan's detractors, arguing that HUAC was "a harsh and permanent fact of American life" in the early Cold War era and, more importantly, that Kazan was testifying against Stalinists, not innocent liberals. He also observes that Kazan's early efforts at self-defense may ironically have worked against him, sealing his image in the public eye. The biography's main goal, however, is to restore Kazan's artistic achievements to their rightful prominence in his life story. Working with the director's extensive production notes, Schickel traces Kazan's rise from a fledgling actor in the Method-touting ensemble the Group Theatre to his creative pinnacle presenting Tennessee Williams on Broadway while making films like 1954's *On the Waterfront*. Despite Schickel's friendship with his subject, this analysis is unsparingly thorough, to the point where Schickel's forceful, personalized criticism becomes as attention grabbing as Kazan's body of work. Photos. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [Booklist](#)

Starred Review Both effusive and enigmatic, brazen and insecure, legendary director Elia Kazan is best known for bringing the emotional realism of mid-twentieth-century New York theater to the silver screen. But, in 1999, the accomplishments of the Greek immigrant and founding member of the Actors Studio were overshadowed by the controversy surrounding his Honorary Academy Award. (In 1952, some 15 years after abandoning the Communist Party, Kazan "named names" before the House Committee on Un-American Activities.) In this sympathetic, scrupulously researched biography, film scholar and *Time* critic Schickel examines the career of the directorial tour de force whose dossier includes Tony Award winner *Death of a Salesman*, *On the Waterfront* (for which he earned the Best Director Oscar), and stage and screen versions of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Kazan's purpose, said playwright and best friend Arthur Miller, was always "to hit the audience in the belly because he knows all people are alike in the belly, no matter what their social position or education." Though Schickel's book focuses on the professional opus of Kazan (who died in 2003), the author also vividly conveys the director's potent personality: his exuberance, relentless work ethic, and frank assessments of the fleeting nature of fame. *Allison Block*
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Review

"Breathtaking, often riotous but never excessive...[Elia Kazan] could not be a more pertinent study of a spellbinding subject." (New York Times Book Review)

"A scintillating and thoroughly readable new biography." (Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

"This sympathetic, scrupulously researched biography...vividly conveys the director's potent personality..." (Booklist (starred review))

"[A] masterly meditation on a complex, conflicted, and underappreciated director. . . . One of the year's best biographies." (Library Journal)

"Schickel has a razor-sharp understanding of the many ways in which his subject's life and work affected

one another.” (Martin Scorsese)

“A worthy companion to the director’s own autobiography...immensely likeable.” (The Economist)

“A splendid, subtle, literate biography of one of the grand creative artists of theater and film in our time.”
(Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.)

“This analysis is unsparingly thorough...Schickel’s forceful, personalized criticism becomes as attention grabbing as Kazan’s body of work.” (Publishers Weekly)

“Richard Schickel has produced the first ‘life’ of Kazan...[with] an impressive knowledge of the terrain [and] soundly balanced judgments.” (Los Angeles Times Book Review)

“...contains not a single dull moment for those interested in the behind-the-scenes aspects of theater and movies...” (New York Press)

“Outstanding...Perhaps, thanks to Schickel’s biography, history will once again remember Kazan primarily for his accomplishments, not his testimony.” (Grand Rapids Press)

“One of those exhilarating publishing rarities -- the ideal writer for the ideal subject.” (Buffalo News)

“Theater and film buffs -- not to mention scholars -- will revel in this astute explication of a working life.”
(New York Sun)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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