

# GENIUS. SLOB. LOVER. LUNATIC. LEGEND.

He was the actor's actor; the greatest actor. But he was always playing a part — driven by contempt, insecurity, fear of fame and the sins of his father. *Total Film* opens up the mad, mad world of **Marlon Brando**...

WORDS **MATT MUELLER**

**O**N THE NIGHT OF 27 MARCH, 1973, Hollywood buzzed with anticipation at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. It was time to welcome Marlon Brando back into the fold and forgive him his past transgressions.

Having spent a decade pissing on his supernova legacy and restyling himself as a grand crusader, Brando had returned triumphantly with his best performance in years – as Don Corleone in *The Godfather* – and was about to be crowned Best Actor for a second time. But he was nowhere to be seen...

Fifteen minutes before the end of the ceremony, a fetching Indian maiden named Sacheen Littlefeather turned up in a black Cadillac with Brando's secretary and Oscar invitation, scurried past frantic Academy staff, and sat down next to James Caan, who said excitedly, "He's gonna win!"

When Roger Moore announced Brando's name to wild applause, Littlefeather, dressed in full buckskin regalia, walked to the podium and held up her palm when Moore tried to give her the statuette. The applause turned to jeers as she informed the assembled glitterati that Brando was

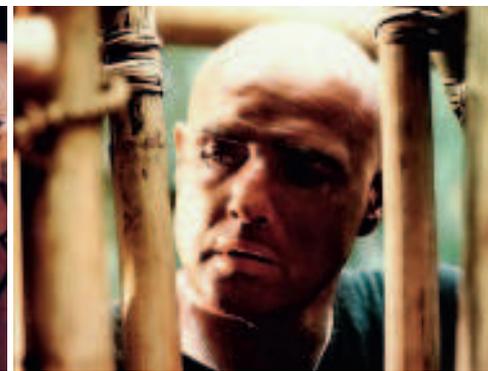
light fixtures with cheese to force classroom evacuations. But he was also a quivering mass of hair-trigger sensitivities: when his roommate tossed the kittens of a stray cat Brando had adopted out of a window, he bludgeoned him with a rubbish bin until the other cadets restrained him.

Expelled from Shattuck, he trailed his sister Jocelyn, an aspiring actress, to New York and, by chance, ended up in Stella Adler's acting class. A disciple of Method maestro Stanislavsky, the flamboyant Adler spotted Brando's innate talent instantly and both moulded and mentored him.

Brando was groomed under Adler's Method tutelage, which channels the pain, rage and sexuality that most people keep concealed into a character to achieve physical and emotional realism. He was her most gifted pupil, able to flip at will between macho toughness and wistful sensitivity.

"His own personality, memories and desires were so deep that there was very little you had to do except tell him what the scene was about," said director Elia Kazan, who spotted him early and, in 1947, cast him as Stanley Kowalski in Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Mumbling and inaudible in rehearsals, he went on to deliver a performance that throbbed with talent, seductiveness and brute male power. As blue-collar tormentor to his wife's nymphomaniac sister Blanche Dubois, he was sadistic and

Method and madness: (from left) in *Julius Caesar*, *Last Tango In Paris* and *Apocalypse Now*.



## 'BRANDO THROBBED WITH SEDUCTIVENESS AND BRUTE MALE POWER'

rejecting his award due to Hollywood's repugnant distortion of Native American history and the indignities still being heaped on the Indian nations.

Watching the telecast back at his mansion, Brando was delighted. As fuck-yous go, he had outdone himself. Mad Marlon hadn't just bitten the hand that fed; he'd savaged it and used the stump to pummel Hollywood round the face...

Born on 3 April, 1924 on a Nebraska farm, Marlon Brando had a miserable childhood, which he livened up with rebellious pranks. His mother was a raging alcoholic who he roused from her daytime stupors by imitating farm animals. He never connected with his sour, womanising father, Marlon Sr, who eventually moved the family to Illinois.

'Bud' (Brando's childhood nickname) was a lazy student, and his father finally shipped him off to Shattuck Military Academy in Minnesota, where he pulled capers like packing

taunting – and, thanks to Brando, audiences ended up feeling as much for him as nuthouse-bound Blanche.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* rocketed him to overnight stardom. After a two-year victory run, he switched to movies. Resisting all efforts to lock him into the standard, seven-year studio contract, he finally settled on Fred Zinneman's *The Men* as his screen debut in 1950. Playing a paraplegic war veteran, Brando spent a month in a wheelchair preparing. On screen, he was moody, but also sensitive and hunky. The critics hailed him a stunning discovery.

He followed up with Kazan's 1951 film of *Streetcar*, which was diluted to appease the morality police, but still emanates a carnal rawness. The final scene – his anguished, moonlit wails of "Stella!", all sweat and torn T-shirt – reverberates with naked need. Astonishingly, three of Brando's co-stars snagged Oscars for *Streetcar*, while he lost out to Humphrey Bogart for *The African Queen*. >>



# BRANDO

In an era of unambiguously confident screen idols like Kirk Douglas and John Wayne, Brando was like a roaring (and smelly, according to co-stars) lion tearing through starchy undergrowth. If contemporaries didn't feel like dinosaurs when he burst on to the scene, they soon would. The bar for film actors had been raised, ushering in an age of androgynous sympathy with the likes of Montgomery Clift and James Dean (who idolised Brando, although Brando was dismissive: "He's using my last year's talent," he sneered at Dean's *East Of Eden*).

The roles that followed – working with Kazan again in *Viva Zapata!*, as Marc Antony in *Julius Caesar* and the motorcycle gang leader terrorising a small town in *The Wild One* – consolidated the Brando cult (although the last of these hasn't aged well, now resembling an ultra-camp, Village People vid).

In 10 performances balancing maschismo with pained sensitivity, he blew away decades of theatrical restraint, although his co-stars weren't always impressed: Lee Marvin went toe to toe with him on *The Wild One*, while Frank Sinatra shunned him on *Guys And Dolls*, slagging him as "Mumbles" and "the most overrated actor in the world".

## METHOD MAN

"It's a very lonely world there in front of the camera with a director who cannot articulate what is needed. An actor always needs to be turned on and Elia Kazan does that," Brando said of the director who dug out three of the most intuitive performances of his career. Yet Brando turned down Kazan's *On The Waterfront* several times, disgusted that the director had named names to the anti-communist House Committee on Un-American Activities. After the role was offered to Sinatra, however, Brando relented and his resentful rival was dumped.

**Twin peaks: (above) Jor-El in *Superman*; as Stanley Kowalksi (left) in *Streetcar* and Don Corleone in *The Godfather*.**



Yet again, his preparation was extensive, as he hung out with real New Jersey dock workers. His searing intensity as Terry Malloy, the ex-boxer longshoreman who slowly develops a conscience, ferries Kazan's gritty exposé of union corruption to heights it would never have reached without him. Watch the justly famous, "I coulda been a contender" sequence between Malloy and his disloyal brother (Rod Steiger) and you'll understand why Brando was so frequently festooned with the "genius" tag.

*Waterfront* looked like an Oscar contender and, for the only time in his career, Brando played the awards game, even turning up to accept his first Best Actor statuette with humble graciousness. "It's a wonderful moment and a rare one and I am certainly indebted," he enthused. "Thank you."

Later, he dismissed it as youthful folly and compensated by unleashing Sacheen Littlefeather. But well before *Waterfront*, Brando despised fame and plaudits. He was rude to autograph hunters and cruel to friends who fawned over him. When respected Italian director Roberto Rossellini (*Rome, Open City*) asked to meet Brando and told him how much he admired him, the actor, sitting in bed in his boxer shorts, didn't even bother getting up. "I thought his behaviour was disgusting," says Ellen Adler, Stella's daughter and Brando's lover for years.

He recoiled as *Time* magazine dubbed him 'The Slob' and regretted spilling his guts on everything from his mother's boozing to his own bisexuality in a *New Yorker* profile. TCM's outstanding new doc, *Brando*, contains a clip in which he drags his father on to Ed Murrow's talk show in 1955, resulting in an excruciating moment when Marlon Sr is asked if he's proud of his son. "Well, as an actor... not really," says the old grump. Brando's agonised expression speaks volumes, although he later masochistically put his father in charge of his production company.

Like pop, Brando was a gloating womaniser, exposing his soft underbelly to woo conquests, then acting the bastard. "I had a real Ford assembly line going," he said. "I knew what I was doing, but I didn't know why I was doing it." (Mother issues, anyone?) The tally would include three wives, including both actresses who played the Tahitian lead in the 1935 and 1962 versions of *Mutiny On The Bounty*.

Eventually, the seductive star retreated to the Tahitian island of Tetiaroa, which he bought in 1966. There, he started noshing his way to the bloated caricature he became – and absent-mindedly spawned the tragic instability that would haunt two of his children.

## FAME AND FLAB

In the '60s, Brando played fast and loose with his talent, slagging off acting and movies as "empty" and "unimportant", then taking on dross like *Candy* and *A Countess From Hong Kong*. In his defence, writing and directing talent were in short supply during the flower-power decade.

Occasionally he'd jolt himself into excellence, as in 1967's *Reflections On A Golden Eye*, playing an impotent military scientist unearthing his latent homosexuality. His angsty scene in front of a mirror inspired the infamous "You talkin' to me?" mirror-monologue in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*.

Being attracted to damaged outcasts evolved into a passionate advocacy for civil and Native American rights, which diverted more and more of his attentions. Sifting his self-loathing psyche for usable performance nuggets also

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## MADMAN MARLON Brando's ever-swinging moods...

- 5 Profoundly hatstand
- 4 Utterly loony
- 3 Borderline bananas
- 2 Mildly mental
- 1 Faintly eccentric

Splitting more than 50 pairs of breeches during the making of *Mutiny On The Bounty*, as ice cream expanded his waistline.



Telling drivers delivering McDonalds orders to throw them over the wall of his Mulholland Drive compound.



Buying a weight-loss device where he would hang upside down. His flab almost suffocated him.



Convincing Scorsese to write a treatment in which he would play God and Michael Jackson the devil.



Telling talk-show host Larry King that Hollywood was run by a Jewish cabal, then planting a kiss on his lips.

took its toll. Bumping into Kazan at a party in the early '60s, he told him he felt like a balding, middle-aged fraud.

Embittered by the only directing experience of his career, the 1961 western *One-Eyed Jacks*, control of which Paramount wrestled from him in the editing suite, Brando lost it on *Mutiny On The Bounty*. His on-set tantrums doubled the budget to a crippling \$25 million, while he strolled around in a sarong and shagged anything that moved (a bout of gonorrhoea was passed off as "indigestion" by the studio PR machine). Co-stars Trevor Howard and Richard Harris despised him: "The picture and Brando were a large dreadful nightmare for me and I'd prefer to forget both as soon as my nerves recover," Harris said.

With his once-muscular body turned to flab thanks to a junk-food diet (he'd consume jars of peanut butter in a sitting), Brando's foppish performance as Fletcher Christian disappointed even longtime devotee Pauline Kael: "He's like a short, flabby tenor wandering around the stage and not singing." Scornful publicity stalled his career and a string of flops left him stewing in self-imposed exile on Tetiaroa.

Mario Puzo ended his decade-long slump by sending him the manuscript for *The Godfather*, saying he wanted him to play Don Corleone. At first, Brando wasn't interested, but he quickly changed his mind, even agreeing to a screen-test — his heavy-jowled, pencil-'tached makeover trumping the suits' objections. Although awed by their legendary co-star, young guns Robert Duvall and James Caan soon affectionately mocked his need to have his dialogue plastered around the set. "The audience doesn't know the difference," Brando said. "But it gives the viewer the feeling that the person's really searching for what he's going to say next."

Don Corleone's imposing presence won Brando his second Best Actor statuette. With the offers flooding in again, it seems strange that he opted for Bernardo Bertolucci's tortured, soft-porn art movie *Last Tango In Paris* (re-released at cinema's this month).

Cast as a tormented hotelier who drifts into sadomasochistic affair with nubile Maria Schneider, it's a despairing performance, tinged with autobiography in Brando's mostly improvised monologues (references to Tahiti, his alcoholic mother). When he saw the finished film, Brando felt horribly exposed and refused to speak to Bertolucci for years.

After an eccentric turn in 1976's *The Missouri Breaks* and \$3.7 million for 12 days' work on *Superman*, Brando was wooed back by Coppola to play the mythical US Colonel Kurtz in Vietnam nightmare, *Apocalypse Now*. The director had two requests: that Brando lose weight and that he read Joseph Conrad's source novel *Heart Of Darkness*.

Coppola was livid when Brando rolled up obese, having neither learned his lines or read the book, demanding hours of the director's time to waffle on about Kurtz's motivation. It

took him three weeks to shave his head, put on black pyjamas and shoot his first scene. He tried to leave before Coppola could film him whispering, "The horror, the horror" and later sued his "good friend" over his share of the profits.

But Brando's behaviour on *Apocalypse Now* paled beside his personal life. His first wife kidnapped their son Christian and took him to Mexico while he was making *Last Tango*; he then had to take a week off and hire private detectives to find him.

Later, his troubled daughter Cheyenne told Christian that her boyfriend was beating her (falsely, it turned out). Christian shot and killed the boyfriend in Brando's living room, resulting in a scandal-baiting trial at which the tabloids mocked Brando's whale-like expansion and mumbling testimony. Christian went to jail for five years; Cheyenne committed suicide in 1995.



**Quay to success:** a turn as docker Terry Malloy in *On The Waterfront* won Brando his first Oscar.

## MATINEE IDLE

Aside from family turmoil, Brando's last two decades were marked by physical decline and a desperate need for cash. He was even prepared to accept \$2 million for a cameo in *Scary Movie 2*, until pneumonia forced him to drop out.

Brando died three years ago of pulmonary fibrosis, leaving one supernova stage appearance and nine or 10 outstanding

# 'MARLON BRANDO CHANGED THE WAY WE JUDGE FILM ACTING'

film performances (out of 40 movies made). The fact that these performances feel as spontaneous now as they did then is testament to his genius. Brando's instinctive pauses, slouches, gestures and mumbled eloquence changed the way we judge film acting, influencing the stars who've impressed us most in his wake: Pacino, De Niro, Penn, Norton, DiCaprio, Depp and, most recently, Ryan Gosling in *Half Nelson*.

"Marlon revolutionised acting. He was without question the pioneer," says his good friend Johnny Depp. Jack Nicholson's tribute is simpler: "He gave us our freedom".

- Spending \$18,000 to fly 50 bags of white sand from Tahiti for the fish tank in his LA mansion.
- Wearing no trousers on the set of 2001's *The Score*, so director Frank Oz — who he called Miss Piggy — couldn't shoot him below the waist.
- Inviting a middle-aged American stalker back to his apartment. And then sleeping with her.
- Punching singer-actress Michelle Phillips when she tried to play piano at his home; he said he thought she was one of the Manson girls.
- Putting electric eels in his swimming pool, convinced he could work out a way to power his house with them.
- Lying naked in a bed of cracked ice for 45 minutes to get the appropriate pall for his death scene in *Mutiny On The Bounty*.