

CINEASTE

What is 'Great' Acting?

Author(s): Patrick McGilligan

Source: *Cinéaste*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (FALL 2006), pp. 36-39

Published by: [Cineaste Publishers, Inc](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41690400>

Accessed: 01-05-2015 16:15 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Cineaste Publishers, Inc is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Cinéaste*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

What is 'Great' Acting?

by Patrick McGilligan

“Robert De Niro Greatest Living Movie Star” was the headline of a 2004 poll for the British film magazine *Empire*, ranking the world’s greatest actors “over the age of 50.” The results travelled the Internet and appeared in newspapers around the world. Such polls proliferate nowadays, and if they do not rate the ‘greatest’ then they are ‘best’ lists, taking their lead from the Oscars. Yet the *Empire* poll (“of around 10,000 readers”) is as good a starting point as any for reflections on what is ‘great’ screen acting, why there is so little of it, and how the topic is inseparable from the sad state of Hollywood today.

Al Pacino scored second place, Jack Nicholson was third, and Paul Newman fourth in the *Empire* poll. One top vote-getter died while the tally was in progress but that didn’t stop the star of *On the Waterfront* and *The Godfather* from clinching fifth place. President Bush, who doesn’t watch films with the same avidity as other recent American presidents, issued a brief proclamation upon his death: “With the passing of Marlon Brando, America has lost a great actor of the stage and screen...”

There’s that word again—‘great.’ It has become a routine adjective, for critics as well as presidents. People ought to be stingier with it. Even in the case of Brando, the greatness should be asterisked: *Not all the time; **Too bad he squandered his talent on inferior projects; ***Mainly in his prime, since, as he aged, the salary-scavenging and talent-squandering worsened. Funny (not funny) how many of those caveats also apply to De Niro, whose ‘great’ roles date back years, arguably decades.

I’m not picking on *Empire*. “Over the age of 50” was shrewd, disqualifying Johnny Depp and other Johnnies-Come-Lately who, nowadays, are out-emoting De Niro. The rest of the *Empire* Top 20 is not too dumb, though Sigourney Weaver leaps out at #10 (like what happens when sports fans get to vote for the All-Stars). Weaver is one of only three actresses on the list, a reminder of the predominant gender of rabid fans (and critics). Poor Meryl Streep, whose intelligent films couldn’t possibly compete with the audience numbers for the *Alien* blockbusters, is #14, and Judi Dench is #20.

Streep is a good marker. Her ten highest-grossing films pale besides those of Weaver, or, say, Julia Roberts. Clearly Streep is picking parts and films for reasons other than salary or box-office prospects. Just as clearly she is the leading actress of her generation. Is there a corollary between the unwillingness to pander to trends, money, or producers, and the greatness of a performer? Are actors (especially stars) who demand obscene salaries partly to blame for the mediocrity of their films?

Yes! Of course!

It has become commonplace for critics, every year for the last five or ten, to refer to the year gone by as “Hollywood’s worst.” I don’t think there is any real argument against the idea that the American cinema has become homogenized, corporatized, ultracommercialized, or whatever pejorative you care to substitute, to an extent that is obvious, rampant, perhaps irreversible. Despite pockets of integrity, ‘the business’ is mostly about sequels, franchises,

remakes, and clichés; setting opening weekend records in the U.S. and then monopolizing the global marketplace.

American screen stars must find their way in a cold world in which their primary value is to the box office. This was true enough in the Golden Age, which I like to refer to as the Bad Old Days, but not as true, because contract actors were kept busy in a variety of films meant to broaden their talent and appeal. When the variety shrinks, when mediocrity prevails, the relative sameness of things makes the vaguely interesting stand out. Polls, award groups, and critics naturally lose perspective.

How about the following, listed in ascending importance, as criteria for ‘great’ acting?

The Actor Should Evince an Original Persona

‘Persona’ is a once-exciting word (“that condensation of attitudes and values which is the star’s image,” in the words of Richard Dyer in his book *Stars*) that, like ‘great,’ probably ought to be retired from film criticism. Every star, every actor—I’m tempted to say every human being—has his or her distinct persona. And every individual’s persona is to some extent a mask, or a form of acting.

Having written books about two disparate stars on the *Empire* list, Jack Nicholson and Clint Eastwood (#9), I can say, on the basis of my own anecdotal poll, that most ordinary people as well as critics confuse attractive personas with ‘great’ acting. I can’t tell you how many people have asked me if Nicholson is really a malicious, Satanic screwball, or whether Clint is truly the nicest fellow in the world.



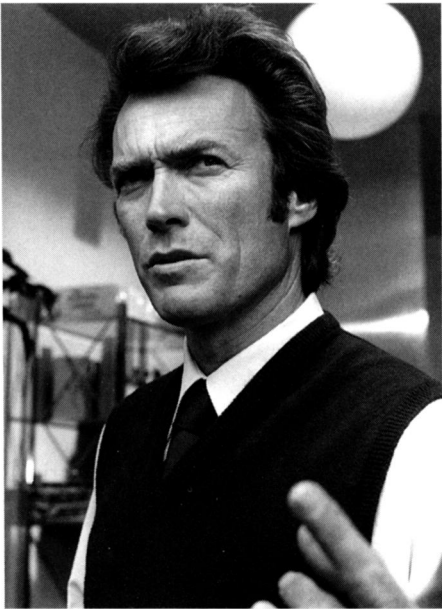
Al Pacino would rate as “great” on anybody’s list of actors: Pacino in *The Godfather* (1972).



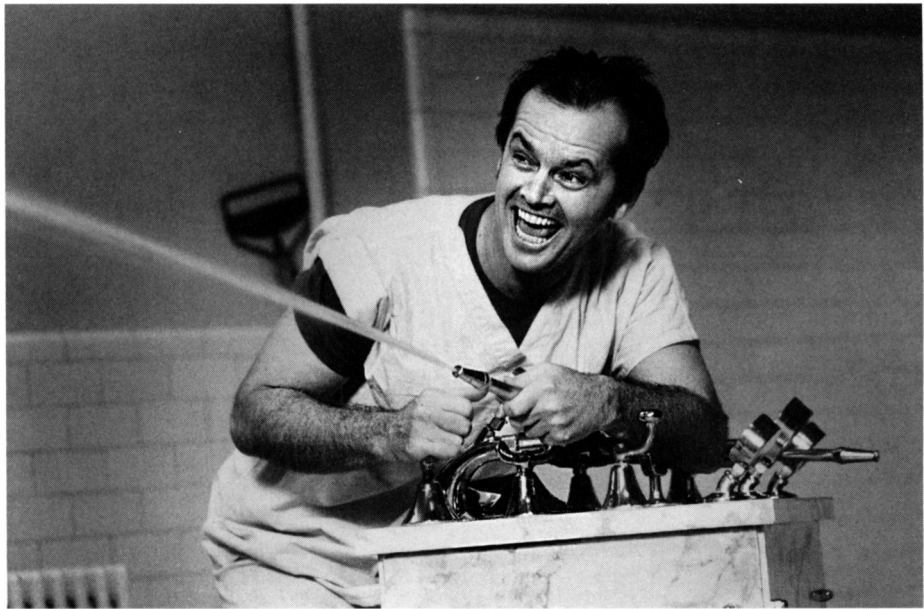
Was John Wayne a great actor, or inhibited by his star persona? Wayne in *Red River* (1948).



Robert De Niro’s best performances were decades ago: De Niro in *Raging Bull* (1980).



Who says I'm a "retro, minimalist" actor?" Clint Eastwood in *Dirty Harry* (1971).



Jack Nicholson is a "great actor" because he has consistently chosen to work with challenging, iconoclastic directors: Nicholson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) (photo courtesy of Photofest).

It's hard to find in one person someone who is equally attracted to (admires or likes) both of these stars. It seems to be either one or the other. I noticed this split most recently at an acting colloquium in France, where there was a huge fan club for Clint—including even a professor who abashedly identified herself as a feminist—with Jack-lovers in the minority. To me, having spent a lot of time researching their lives and careers, one of these guys is extremely retro, a minimalist, one-dimensional, back-in-the-1950's type in the roles he plays and films he makes, whereas the other is a more open-ended, rebellious figure, whose work is rooted in the 1960's. But my point is 'personas' are really projected values, not 'great' acting.

One major caveat to this might be the actor who 'plays himself' with continuing, evolving, unpredictable consequences. Richard Dyer, in France, reminded me how creative the process of developing a persona can be, that, when an actor is 'playing himself,' he is creating an alternative, fictional version of his (and this will be the last time I say 'or her') real self. The prime example of this is John Wayne. As his persona developed—by stages he adopted his signature walk and talk—he transformed himself into the icon we know as 'John Wayne.' And his work became more ambitious.

But was John Wayne truly a great actor? Or was he ultimately inhibited by his persona, his ease and comfort at 'playing himself'? I like what Lee Strasberg said about the hidden requirements of acting: "The things that fed the great actors of the past as human beings were of such strength and sensitivity that when these things were added to conscious effort, they unconsciously and

subconsciously led to the results in all great acting, the great performances accomplished by people who would say if asked, 'I don't know how I do it.' In themselves as human beings were certain sensitivities and capacities which made it possible for them to create those great performances, even though they were unaware of the process."

In other words, 'conscious effort' makes a difference. And the more strictly defined persona reflects a more narrowly explored humanity. A standard critical complaint about De Niro these days (it's not often enough applied to other stars) is that he chooses glib parts, often lampooning his own image, and to some extent has become a prisoner of his own straitjacket.

Is Robert De Niro really that great a screen actor? Were John Wayne and Fred Astaire? Patrick McGilligan offers a few criteria for separating the Streeps from the Sandleres when it comes to evaluating quality of performance.

An Actor Should Express Range and Versatility

In the Bad Old Days, actors were expected to sing, dance, stumble through slapstick comedy, waft through light comedy, heavily emote in tension-filled dramas, even ride a horse. There were 'talent schools' on every lot to help them climb into the saddle for their inevitable Western. Not today, and the range and expectations have dwindled. A limited range is not the worst thing: Fred Astaire certainly had limitations, though obviously he compensated in other areas, dominating the vision of his films and taking his performances to such a beautiful, expert extreme that, as with Michael Jordan, it was

hard to imagine anyone else coming along who might compare with him. (Although Gene Kelly, a daring, hardworking performer, did come along and does compare.)

When actors must shape their own careers, stepping their way through the minefield that is Hollywood today, they must be proactive or they will end up, to some degree, donning the wardrobe of previous performances. Their complacency will beget repetition and typecasting. The actor Jeff Corey, who, while blacklisted, served as an acting mentor to a generation of Hollywood thespians, advised me of Stanislavski's dictum that an actor shouldn't be hobbled by the "despotism of acquired habits," which is the persona or role repeated with lazy or modest variation.

"There is a great difference between searching for and choosing in oneself emotions related to a part and altering the part to suit one's more facile resources," Stanislavski advised in *Building a Character*. "Why should we change into another character when we shall be less attractive in it than in real life? You see, you really love yourself in the part more than you love the part in yourself. That is a mistake."

Stanislavski was discussing acting in the theater, and perhaps the cinema is different. The early Soviet film masters, who exalted editing and montage, tended to be dismissive of acting. Kuleshov's experiment with the onetime matinee idol Ivan Mozhukhin, intercutting Mozhukhin's *expressionless* face with three different objects, obtaining dissimilar emotional effects, implied that audiences did half the acting.

Later on, André Bazin, pondering the nature of cinema, discussed acting almost as an afterthought. Indeed, to Bazin, 'great' acting

had little to do with the medium "The human being is all-important in the theater," Bazin wrote in one essay. "The drama on the screen can exist without actors," and indeed can be improved by images of "a banging door, a leaf in the wind, waves beating on the shore."

But time has proven that the human being is all-important in the cinema, too. Ivan Mozhukhin had the right face, and audiences want faces. They want familiar faces, tics, and traits, and familiarity breeds stardom. The trick for stars as well as supporting players, if they care at all, is how to stretch and grow within that familiarity.

Actors Should Explore Depths

Actors should explore humanity. That means an actor should explore himself, and characters outside himself. 'Great' actors should laugh, weep, kill, die, suffer desperation and madness. Any screen actor who hasn't done these things should be docked points. Actors should reveal, not withhold. They should invite troubling intimacy. Otherwise they are merely coasting.

Having a 'deep' persona is not the same as being a 'great' actor. Trying for depth is not the same as achieving depth. Feeling depth is not the same as conveying it.

Depth is not range or versatility. Jeff Bridges may not have a 'deep' persona, but he is a searching actor; his career is impressive not only for its stealth productivity, but also for a longtime, persistent pursuit of quality. Watch how he investigates himself, breaks himself down, as a man afraid of nothing and everything in Peter Weir's *Fearless*—it's a word that might stand as Bridges's acting credo.

Compare Bridges with someone like Kurt Russell, who is every bit as capable, who has made many highly entertaining films, and who could probably play any role written by Shakespeare. Russell could be 'great.' But he needs to work harder; he needs the part or film that, it's my impression, he doesn't look for hard enough.

You can see this problem clearly with someone like Adam Sandler, who epitomizes a trend among contemporary comedians (Jim Carrey is another example) to assert themselves as 'serious' (i.e., 'great') actors. (Not a bad trend, though the entire history of Hollywood mitigates against it.) Sandler labors in *Mr. Deeds*—not to mention *Spanglish* and *Punch-Drunk Love*—to rise to the material. It's not fair to compare him to Gary Cooper, one of the greatest of the true greats, who was as adept at comedy as he was moving in drama, but Sandler himself invites the comparison by reenacting a classic Cooper role. Let us say, simply, that Sandler falls short.

The possibilities for depth is why actors flock to Robert Altman films and work for scale. Depth is a requirement of 'great' stage plays, but in Hollywood really it's a debit for the project. Stage actors have the tougher job and smaller paycheck. Al Pacino would rate as 'great' on anybody's list, not simply because of *The Godfather*, but because people understand he is the rare screen star who is willing and able to get up on stage and perform in

I'll Be in My Trailer:

Creative Wars Between Directors & Actors

by John Badham and Craig Modderno.
Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions,
2006. 217 pp., illus. Paperback: \$26.95.

This unassuming exploration of the relationship between directors and actors is a how-to book intended for the boss behind the camera, but it might attract a wider audience. Writing breezily, Badham, a director who started with *The Bingo Long Traveling All-Stars and Motor Kings* in 1976, takes colleagues on a journey of do's and don'ts, with examples about star wars from his own career. Sprinkled in, Workman Publishing-style, are quotes and tidbits from Craig Modderno's long career as a free-lance interviewer.

There are gems of advice (use "Active Action Verbs") as well as ringing anecdotes. Here you can learn how cameraman (now director) Jan De Bont got "that one famous shot" in *Basic Instinct*, convincing (tricking?) Sharon Stone into spreading her legs wide. How Sydney Pollack coaxed tears from Barbara Streisand for *The Way We Were*. How Mark Rydell schemed to heighten John Wayne's performance in *The Cowboys* by surrounding him with a supporting cast of "left-wing hippies" and formerly blacklisted Hollywood reds.

My favorite story comes from Peter Hyams, who was worried about dealing with Steve McQueen and, hat in hand, approached for advice the notoriously gruff ("the angriest man that ever walked the earth") filmmaker Richard Brooks. Hyams got about one minute of the great man's time, and this advice: "Listen and listen good. The business of making movies with movie stars is the business of eating shit. Now get out of here."

The frame of reference is mostly contemporary, though Badham and Modderno throw in some Golden Age nuggets (citing Kazan, et. al from other books). There are a surfeit of television personalities (but hey, they do some excellent acting on TV these days). Clichés are not unwelcome ("The bars and coffee shops of Hollywood are filled with people who desperately want to be great actors but don't have the right stuff").

Mostly the words are sincere and the tone is right. The thing about directing and acting is that for every truism there are numerous exceptions and opposite schools of belief. Badham knows this, and is humorous and self-deprecating when he isn't being thoughtful.

Though, from *Saturday Night Fever* to, more recently, episodic television, Badham has an underrated body of work, one doesn't necessarily think of him as a guru of acting wisdom. (Not to mention Roger Corman, one authority quoted.) "A nice and bright man," is how Modderno describes his coauthor, a small example of this book's straight talk. Together they have written a nice, bright book.—Patrick McGilligan

classic as well as modern or experimental drama. Then, to his credit, he has used his clout to help bring some of those works to the screen.

A 'Great' Actor Needs a 'Great' Director

Jack Nicholson's peers have honored him with three Oscars and nine nominations, which is more Oscar nods than anyone else in the history of Hollywood, but the real reason he is a 'great' actor is that he has consistently elected to work with challenging, iconoclastic, often brutally authoritarian filmmakers. Early in his career Nicholson consciously aligned himself with Bob Rafelson, Mike Nichols, Michelangelo Antonioni, Milos Forman, Hal Ashby, Arthur Penn, Elia Kazan, Tony Richardson, Warren Beatty, and John Huston. More recently he has bravely tossed the dice with emerging talents from the younger generation, people like James L. Brooks, Tim Burton, Alexander Payne, and Nancy Meyers. When all is said and done, no one will have a list of better directors on their gravestone.

A stage actor must sustain continuity over several hours of 'live' performance. Screen acting is compiled editing of the 'best' takes that could have been filmed over the course of years. A stage actor feeds off the immediate reaction and energy of the audience. A screen actor has three audiences: the imaginary one; himself, which is not unimportant; and the director calling 'action' and choosing the 'take.' V.I. Pudovkin wrote about the film director as the sole spectator, with an "especial responsibility" to create the "optimum conditions for free, easy, and sincere acting," and as the person most "directly affected," who must either admire the actor, or show disappointment.

Now it's a curious thing about the journeymen directors under contract to the major studios in the Bad Old Days, but few were known to articulate profound theories about acting. Few, even, guided their actors with memorable advice. William Wyler was notorious, for example, for demanding upwards of a dozen takes with Bette Davis, saying little except, "Another one." Arguably, she gave her greatest performances under his sole spectatorship. John Wayne grew as an actor precisely because he subordinated himself to tyrannical taskmasters like Howard Hawks and John Ford, who venomously chewed his handkerchief if he didn't like what he saw. Surrendering himself to such disparate geniuses as Frank Capra, Alfred Hitchcock, and Anthony Mann helped elevate James Stewart to the pantheon.

I don't know if James Naremore is kidding or not when he accuses Michael Curtiz of manipulating Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca* the way Kuleshov handled Mozhukhin, telling Bogart to turn this way and that, but Curtiz was a formidable handler of Warners stars in his heyday. Today, with the fluid camera dominating the America cinema, with the decline of composition and dialog, a 'great' performance is all the more unlikely without a 'great' director knowledgeable about extracting one.



Jeff Bridges's outstanding performance in Peter Weir's *Fearless* (1993) succeeds in portraying a man who is afraid of nothing and everything (photo courtesy of Photofest).

A 'Great' Actor Needs a 'Great' Role in a 'Great' Script

Don't get me wrong: I'm not nostalgic for the Bad Old Days. I'm a modernist, and believe today's screen actors are as 'great,' potentially, as yesteryear's immortal. I have my current favorite stars and supporting players, like everybody else. Very good performances are the norm. And there are occasional marvelous performances, especially in independent films, made outside the Hollywood system. But truly great parts are few and far between, and a system which targets the lowest common denominator guarantees scripts that are typically worse than the directors.

That is why I insist the "greatest" actors nowadays are those who get heavily involved with their scripts, or with developing their own projects. What stops Hollywood actors from writing or developing their own scripts? Lack of willpower, or ambition, and either can be linked to a system in which people are overpaid for formulaic entertainment.

I don't mean actors who work only on their own parts, and I suppose there are ways other than writing that an actor might watch over his career. About thirty years ago, I wrote a book about James Cagney, proposing the theory that he was the real *auteur* of his

films because he made accomplices of his writers and dominated his directors and ultimately, as the principal creative force behind the scenes, molded his own greatness. You can also see that argument in the cases of Mae West, or, again, Fred Astaire, who never took a script credit, never directed, but whose 'dance' films, in particular, right down to much of the camerawork, are fundamentally his creation.

"Depth is not range or versatility. Jeff Bridges may not have a 'deep' persona, but he is a searching actor; his career is impressive not only for its stealth productivity, but for a longtime, persistent pursuit of quality."

By default, then, Woody Allen—writer, director, producer, and lead actor of so many of his films—would have to be ranked among America's 'greatest living movie stars.' (He's absent from the *Empire* rankings.) Obviously, purely as an actor, Woody might fall into a category unto himself, but I would argue that in many other ways—especially any definition of depth—he is the artistic equal or superior to any actor. And Woody is the best example of an actor as *auteur* because he writes his scripts.

The Greatest Actors Boast an Enduring Body of Work

This seemingly self-evident requirement is last on my list, and could very well be least. I was tempted to leave it off altogether. A body of work, like a star's persona, is pretty much in the eye of the beholder. Every actor, eventually, has a cumulative body of work, and every filmography has its defenders.

When it comes to 'greatness,' the criteria should be *quantity of quality*. Certain once-busy and admirable stars, like Warren Beatty and Robert Redford, have taken too much time off from serious acting. Were they once-great actors, are they still-great? Only time will tell.

I like what Julius J. Epstein, the scenarist of *Casablanca* and many other films, said, when I asked him how many films that he wrote he was truly proud of. He waved the fingers of one hand. I looked aghast, and Epstein said, "Take the top playwrights. How many Tennessee Williams plays were really good? Maybe three or four out of a whole forty years' work. So if you've done sixty or whatever pictures I've done..."

"Yeah, a handful. But that's enough."

That was the Bad Old Days. Today, in many ways, things are worse. But it's not too much to ask that, amidst a solid body of work, an actor prove his 'greatness,' at least a few times. ■