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Remembering Ernest Borgnine

Garner Simmons · Thursday, July 12th, 2012

Some actors are chameleons, uncomfortable in their own skins. Always searching for that next part to play so that they can avoid being themselves. This was not Ernest Borgnine. Garrulous and outgoing, Ernie seized life the way an oversized child attacks Christmas presents – with all the exuberance and certainty that whatever is wrapped inside was intended for him alone. As a result, his range as an actor was equally outsized. From the broadly comedic (*McHale's Navy*) to the darkly dramatic (*Bad Day at Black Rock*) to the poignant (*Marty*), Borgnine embraced each role with equal fervor and made it his own. In short, he was one of the most creative actors in the business. Totally fearless, he once told me that the thing he loved most about acting was that your character was capable of anything, even things you knew you could never do in real life. To illustrate the point, he recalled a horror film titled *Willard* in which his character is swarmed by rats. When director Daniel Mann asked him if he wanted a stunt double, Ernie declined: “For the gag to really work, the audience has gotta be able to see my face as the rats attack. Don’t think about it, just do it.” Ernie was special.



We first met in the fall of 1973 at his home overlooking the San Fernando Valley. I was a grad student from Northwestern working on a book on film director Sam Peckinpah and Ernie had just finished Robert Aldrich’s *Emperor of the North*. Protected by a legion of agents and managers, the meeting had taken weeks to arrange. And in truth, had Ernie himself not intervened, it never would have happened. But having worked with Peckinpah on *The Wild Bunch*, Ernie wanted to talk about it.

He had not been Peckinpah’s first choice for the role of Dutch Engstrom, second-in-command to William Holden’s Pike Bishop. Dutch is described in the screenplay by Walon Green and Peckinpah as “...big, young, good-natured with a fast gun-hand... and a bone-deep distaste for rules and regulations. He can sing, has more than his share of charm...” Ernie was 51, and despite having been married to Ethel Merman for all of 32 days in 1964, he had never been accused of singing. But since *The Wild Bunch* was Peckinpah’s comeback film after years of being blacklisted, Warner Brothers had the final say. Notoriously difficult to work with, Peckinpah had a habit of testing everyone. To complicate matters, Borgnine had broken his foot on his previous film, *The Split* and thus arrived in Mexico with a walking cast on his left foot.

As fate would have it, the first scene to be shot was the major action sequence that opens the film in which the Bunch, including Borgnine, attempt to rob a railroad office in the West Texas town of Starbuck only to be ambushed by bounty hunters. In order to escape, Borgnine’s character would have to cross a street some 50 feet wide between the office and their horses as all hell broke loose

around him. Always inventive, Ernie remembered it this way:

“So Sam came up to me and said, ‘Borgnine, how in the Christ are we going to get you across that street?’ And I said, ‘Will you leave it to me?’ And he said, ‘What do you have in mind?’ I said: ‘Just leave it to me. Crank your cameras and I’ll be okay.’ So he said, ‘Okay, go ahead,’ and walked away.

“Well they started to roll the cameras, and I came out of that office and jumped behind that bloody water trough. Then when I got the signal to move, I rolled across the street to where the horses were, firing at the same time. So when it was over, Sam came up to me with this big grin on his face and he says, ‘Ya lovable son of a bitch, that was great! Thank you!’ That was all. But I had passed the test, and we never had a harsh word between us.”

Few actors have careers that span more than a couple of decades. Ernie’s lasted over 60 years and included more than 200 films and television series. At the age of 95, his final starring role is in a new film titled *The Man Who Shook the Hand of Vincente Fernandez* due out this year. An oversized career for an actor who loved every minute of it.

At the end of *The Wild Bunch* as the credits roll, Sam Peckinpah reprises what is perhaps the most elegiac moment in the film: the Bunch’s ride out of Angel’s village as the strains of *Las Golondrinas* fill the air one last time. Having just seen them die in one of the most cathartic gunfights ever staged, there is something poignant and uplifting about seeing them alive onscreen one last time. In fact, it is the way I will always remember Ernest Borgnine – backlit, mythic, larger-than-life, riding into the history of film, preserved through the magic of the cinema forever.

Image: Ernest Borgnine in The Wild Bunch.

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