

John Garfield: The Absolute Outsider

By Philip Berroll

"What are you gonna do, kill me?" says John Garfield, as boxer Charlie Davis, to the mobster for whom he refuses to throw a fight. "Everybody dies!" The line is typical Garfield: defiant, but with an underlying sense of his own mortality. It's from the classic boxing drama *Body and Soul* (1947) – a highlight of the Film Society of Lincoln Center's series, "Running All The Way: The Films of John Garfield," which runs for three weeks starting August 9. This retrospective is long overdue for an actor who despite a substantial body of work – more than 30 films, some legitimate classics – has never quite earned the iconic status of some of his contemporaries in the decades since his untimely death.

Next to Humphrey Bogart, John Garfield was the dominant tough guy of American cinema in the 1940's. But while Bogart's characters often had a tenuous position in society, Garfield was usually cast as an absolute outsider – the drifter, the criminal, the soldier of fortune. With a nasal, sneering voice and a look of constant wariness, he personified the kid from the wrong side of the tracks: cynical, mistrustful, out for himself unless a better offer – usually from a woman – came along. Sometimes he was a victim of injustice; more often, he played men who just expected a raw deal from the world, and were ready to give as good as they got.

His persona was authentic; it was rooted in his poverty-stricken childhood on the Lower East Side, where he was born Julius Garfinkle in 1913. (Always proud of his heritage, he would become the first serious actor to play identifiably Jewish roles on screen.) Turning to the theater as a way out of the ghetto, Garfield made his Broadway debut while in his teens, and later became a leading player with the legendary Group Theater, working with other hungry young men like Elia Kazan, Clifford Odets, and Lee Strasberg.

Hollywood soon came calling. Garfield's 1938 debut in *Four Daughters*, one of 23 films to be shown in the Film Society series, was a sensation; as a working-class musician who disrupts the placid lives of a Middle American family, he was nominated for an Oscar. His character in the film was a relatively nice guy, but his studio, Warner Brothers, saw him as the successor to the aging James Cagney – the new king of the street punks. They

cast Garfield in melodramas whose plots were about as subtle as their titles (*They Made Me a Criminal*; *Dust Be My Destiny*). But he was occasionally allowed to show more range, as in *The Sea Wolf*, a first-rate adaptation of Jack London's novel, where he plays a shanghaied sailor up against brutal captain Edward G. Robinson.

Exempt from the draft in World War II because he had a wife and children (and a serious heart condition), he made several war films, including Howard Hawks' *Air Force* and the fact-based, poignant story of a blinded soldier, *Pride of the Marines*. But it was four films made between 1946 and 1948 that cemented Garfield's reputation.

The Postman Always Rings Twice is a gripping adaptation of James M. Cain's lust-and-murder thriller, with Garfield and Lana Turner generating far more steam than the tepid Nicholson-Lange remake. Kazan's *Gentleman's Agreement*, the groundbreaking drama about anti-Semitism, featured the first use of the epithet "yid" in a Hollywood film – addressed to Garfield, who naturally responds with a punch.

He triumphed again in *Body and Soul* and *Force of Evil*, two films – scripted by the gifted Abraham Polonsky, who will be present at several of the screenings – dealing with the price of the American Dream. In Robert Rossen's *Body and Soul*, Charlie Davis achieves success in the ring, but alienates everyone who cares about him. In *Force of Evil*, directed by Polonsky, Garfield is Joe Morse, an ambitious lawyer caught in a squeeze play when his gangster client muscles in on the Mom-and-Pop numbers racket run by Joe's brother.

It's impossible to watch these two films without a sense of tragedy, and not just for their often grim storylines. Even as they were in production, the Congressional witchhunt for Communists in Hollywood was beginning, and its ugliest outgrowth, the blacklist, soon followed. Polonsky was an early victim; so were Rossen, *Body and Soul* co-stars Anne Revere and Canada Lee, and countless others among Garfield's friends and colleagues.

Then Garfield himself fell under suspicion because of his work with the left-leaning Group Theater. But he refused to “name names” before the House Un-American Activities Committee – for a man of his background, an informer was the lowest form of humanity – and his career was destroyed. He died of heart failure in 1952, at the age of 39.

It is impossible to know how the rest of Garfield's career would have played out had he lived. But his influence among latter-day tough guys like Al Pacino, Robert DeNiro and Harvey Keitel is clear. Check out the Film Society series and you can see where they learned some of their best moves.

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