

# Contenders

By Marc Robinson

**On the Waterfront**  
 By Budd Schulberg with  
 Stan Silverman  
 (Closed)

*On the Waterfront* remains a powerful film because, for all its pretensions to social commentary, it moves steadily inward, mining a psychological landscape and never reaching bottom. The war between the mob and the longshoremen is merely the background for the more ambiguous battles within each character's conscience—battles that the film deliberately leaves unsettled. Father Barry never quite reconciles personal principle with church protocol. Edie Doyle won't give up trying to honor both the memory of her murdered brother and her love for the man who betrayed him. And, until the final scene, Terry Malloy thinks he can be loyal to his brother, his employer, and himself all at once. In Terry's case, Elia Kazan emphasizes the hopelessness of this ambition by training his camera on Brando's face. The essence of the film's ethical debate is revealed when Brando's eyes narrow; or when his face slowly goes slack; or when, for an instant, he allows a smile and then seems to take it back. He is trapped within the frame—scrutinized and claustrophobic.

Budd Schulberg and Stan Silverman's adaptation of Schulberg's screenplay sacrifices this intimacy. With so much air around the actors on a big Broadway



Ron Eldard as Terry

stage, the pressure-cooker tension dissipates. But in exchange, Schulberg and his director, Adrian Hall, recover the story's epic dimensions. These characters are bound to a machine, helpless to resist—or even understand—so massive a system of competing interests.

Hall's production is unabashedly old-fashioned. Its virtues, which are genuine, derive less from emotional subtlety or formal ingenuity than from bombast. Eugene Lee's set is all scaffolding and steel girders: warehouse doors come crashing down; metal walls slide ominously to reveal yet more walls. The lighting is always white and harsh, falling in tall shafts to isolate and humiliate the characters.

This *Waterfront* is what I always imagined Group Theater productions to be like—thundering, hearty, full of stocky men raising their fists. Hall has populated

his docks with a picturesque array of mobsters. Some are big, some are small, but every suit is shiny and every mug is craggy. They call women "fillies," money "cabbage." And 40 years after the film, the thugs finally get to say "fuck"—which they do with relish, their voices the texture of sandpaper.

Ron Eldard as Terry stands apart. It is unnecessary to compare him to Brando: Eldard has exploited theatrical possibility to reshape the role. Deprived of close-ups, Eldard expresses Terry's anxieties in his body. Even in quiet scenes, he's always looking over his shoulder, shifting his weight, roaming the stage like a prisoner still expecting to be caught. His urgency gives an over-familiar story fresh suspense. Unfortunately, he is ill-served by Penelope Ann Miller's Edie, whose desperation is whiny instead of resolute. And his momentum falters at the end, when Schulberg lets Terry conquer self-doubt and intimidation too easily. In the film, Terry rises from near death after a brutal beating. Here, he simply pushes his boss to the ground and strides off.

The most fascinating character in *On the Waterfront* is Schulberg himself. Why has he returned to this story yet again? He has already published a novel and written many articles about Terry's ordeal. The film, in its vindication of the informer, has been widely interpreted as Schulberg and Kazan's justification for naming names in their HUAC testimony. Of course Schulberg dismisses this reading, but one can't help seeing this play as one more attempt to master guilt and exorcise demons.

# Colored Too

By Luis H. Francia

**Rita's Resources**  
 By Jeannie Barroga  
 Pan Asian Repertory Theatre  
 423 West 46th Street  
 245-2660

It's late 1974, and the world around Rita, José, and their two daughters, Arlette and Marnie, slouches toward chaos. On the moral landscape are Nixon's corrupt governance and the Patty Hearst case, in which the victim seems to be colluding in her own kidnapping. In Jeannie Barroga's *Rita's Resources*, society's discontents are mirrored in the lives of this Filipino immigrant family. Via America is Via Dolorosa, its imminent demise harped on incessantly by the nutty radio DJ whom Rita listens to as she helps make ends meet by sewing Hawaiian dresses for overweight white matrons.

Caught up unwillingly in the struggle to survive, teenaged Arlette and the older Marnie have no lives of their own. And José, a club singer when he's not working for the city, naively believes he can have his own show, like Lawrence Welk or Desi Arnaz.

Trouble is, as Freddie, his kindly black, Korean-vet neighbor points out, Welk is white, and Desi loves Lucy. Freddie knows that the real war isn't in 'Nam but at home. So, too, does Bob, a handsome ex-navy man and José's townmate who boards with the family. Freddie, while disillusioned, resists the seductive call of bitterness. Not Bob; tasting the American Dream,

he's found it full of rocks.

As played by Zar Acayan, Bob has all the somnolent but deadly charm of a serpent bearing knowledge in a mightily flawed garden. His talismanic smile and oily obsequiousness gradually make the family partners in his opportunistic schemes (except for Arlette, and we wonder how long she can resist), thus permanently skipping the hard route to utopia. Carpe diem, with a cynic's twist.

That the Dream has its nightmarish side, capable of divesting nose-to-the-grindstone immigrants of their humanity, is nothing new. Barroga endeavors to explore its less obvious manifestations, relating white society's xenophobia to Rita's racism toward Freddie, a prejudice shaped as much by colonialism as by her willful avoidance of who she is. It's an avoidance that infects José, invested by Marshall Factor with a benign, cheerful corruptibility: his stage name is Buddy, and he and his band present themselves as Hawaiians. At least he admits, "We're colored too." Otherwise the connections between the family's world and the larger one remain sketchy, more uttered than shown, resulting in an emotionally hollow core. It may have been Barroga's intent to underline the isolated, rootless condition of people devoured by mindless materialism; nevertheless, what transpires is largely predictable. Highly uneven, *Rita's Resources* illustrates the perils not just of the American Dream but of mining a too-familiar lode.

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