

Interview: Ernest Borgnine

Contributed by Gary Sweeney

{comments on} Ernest Borgnine is a legendary actor whose career has spanned decades, and who has covered virtually every genre of film in his vast body of work. His face is well-known all over the world from his work on television and in classic movies such as *From Here to Eternity* and *Marty*. Last year, he penned his memoirs in an autobiography titled *Ernie: The Autobiography*. Ernie is the oldest living Oscar winner for Best Actor; and though he has nothing more to prove, he continues to act and earn award nominations. We had the great honor of speaking with him about his life, career and philosophies on good acting. This one-time military man transformed himself into one of the most beloved actors of all time, while never losing sight of his roots and treating his fellow actors with respect. He was recently honored on TCM with "Private Screenings", a close look at his career with the films that helped make him a household name. We would like to extend a special thank you to Sarah at Turner Classic Movies for her help in setting up this interview. You can read the transcription and listen to the audio below. If your browser is not equipped with Flash, you can download it right here.

MP: Today I'm speaking with Classic Hollywood icon and Academy Award winning actor Ernest Borgnine. In a career that has spanned decades, he's worked with the biggest names in the business, all the while remaining humble and dedicated to perfecting his craft. Ernie, thank you so much for your time today, it's an honor.

Ernie: Gary, my pleasure my friend. You betcha. What can I do for you?

MP: First things first, TCM is putting the spotlight on you with their Private Screenings, which is an hour-long interview followed by some of your best-known work. What does that say to you, to have your films held in such high regard so many years later?

Ernie: What can I possibly say? I'm very humble, I really am. People say nice things about me, and I don't know, what can I possibly say? You know, my mother told me one time, if you can make one person happy in the span of 24 hours, you've accomplished a great deal. And believe me, when people say to me "Gee wilikers, you made this, you made this, and I love this and I love that, and you're so wonderful and this and that", that to me is just about everything except it doesn't put bread and butter on my table, but I really enjoy it because of the fact it means that people really like my work.

MP: You were in the Navy as a young man, and you seemed to jump from right the military to becoming an actor. I understand your mother played a part in that. How did all of that happen?

Ernie: Well, let me tell you. I came back after ten years in the service. I did six years before and came out and was out for three months and bam, I was right back in the swing of things because of the fact that World War II had started. And so I went back and they put me on a ship, and we were guarding the entire Atlantic coastline with a (laughs) yacht. And that's what it was, just a plain old yacht that had been used by old man Murphy who made Murphy beds that came out of the wall. And he turned over his yacht to the Navy for a dollar, and so they slapped a gun on it, .635 caliber air crew Brownings and they said "Go out and fight the war, you know." (laughs) They put what they call a Y-gun which is for depth charges and it would go off on both sides of the ships instead of rolling off the stern because we didn't go fast enough to roll them off the stern. Well, one day we got a submarine dead to rights, and the old man called me up, the skipper called me up, and he said, "Gunner, I want you to, when I blow the whistle, let those Y-guns go." And I said "Yes sir." So he blew the whistle and off they went BOOM. And I think it was the first time anybody had ever heard a gun go off, these kids...they didn't know, they hadn't been around guns or anything. And they were just standing there, open-mouthed you know, and I'm giving them a swift kick in the behind "Come on, come on, load it up, load it up, let's go!" We dropped another one and still no explosions. We dropped ten of them and there were no explosions at all. We saw one later at a distance, and I said, "Oh my God, what have I done?" I couldn't believe it. I knew everything had gone off right, but something was wrong. So the old man came down and said, "Well, we lost 'em, we lost the submarine, but what happened here?" I told him, "Captain, I don't know." We got back into port and we started taking these tin cans off. And I said "Wait a minute, we got fulminated mercury in there and everything else." And the captain said, "Oh, you got a chipping hammer, Gunner?" I said "Yeah." So he took the chipping hammer and he found a place where it had the identification on the side and scrapped it all off and he said, "Well, there's your trouble." And it was manufactured in 1917. And that is what we went to war with. (laughs) It surprised us just as much as it surprised everybody else. How we won this war is beyond me, I don't know!

MP: So how do you go from that to becoming an actor?

Ernie: Well, I went home after the service, and my mother said to me after a couple of weeks, she said, "Well?" one of those wells "Are you going to get a job or what?" So I packed a lunch and I went out looking for work. And I'd stand there

at the Winchester repeating arms company, and the clock company, and the different places around town. And I'd see these young old men walking into these factories, and I'd say to myself, "Me? Walking into there?" And I said, "They're old before their time....I can't do it. Not after ten years in the service. That's crazy." So I went home, and my mother saw this expression on my face and she said "What's the matter Ernie?" And I said "Mom, for two cents, I'd go back in the service and do my other ten years and get a pension. At least I'll have something at the end of ten, twenty years." And out of a clear blue sky she said, "Have you ever thought about becoming an actor? You always like to make a darn fool of yourself in front of people, why don't you give a try?"

MP: And make some money off it.

Ernie: Yeah. And I was seated at the kitchen table, and I looked up and I saw that golden door open and the light came down. And I said "Mom, that's what I'm going to be." And ten years later, I had someone handing me an Oscar and saying "You're the best actor in the world."

MP: Now of course you're talking about "Marty" and that interests me because that film wasn't even made for the purpose of becoming successful...

Ernie: That's right, that's right. They wanted to make it as a tax loss. See, but that's the Good Lord working all the time.

MP: And you got an Academy Award for it. You're still somewhat of a newcomer.

Ernie: That's it, that's it.

MP: Now let me ask you. What is your opinion on the end of the studio system when it did end? Do you think that was more beneficial to the movie industry or more damaging to the movie industry?

Ernie: More beneficial. In every way it was more beneficial. They had a colony of actors that worked in there, and they had to put them in the pictures and everything else. Of course, they'd used outside actors as well, but the majority of them were all working for studios, and studios would pay them 51 weeks out of the year, they'd give them a week off. And if they liked them, they'd bring them back and if they didn't, they'd go on somewhere else. And in the meantime, they were teaching you your livelihood. They were putting you in pictures, and they would take their time and instruct you, and teach you how to dance, they'd teach you sword fighting, they'd teach you everything in the world. I had a fellow come up to me one time over at Universal, and this was after the end of the studio system, and he was still under contract at Universal. And he said, "Mr. Borgnine, I don't know. I'm not getting anywhere here. I've a good mind to quit everything." And I said "Why? You're getting paid every week, aren't you?" He said yes. I said, "They're teaching you what to do. They're teaching you everything else, you're sharpening your talent all the time to keep busy so you can go on and on and on." He said, "Yeah, that's true." I said, "Then why are you quitting?" He said, "Well, maybe you're right, Mr. Borgnine. I'm going to keep it up, I'm going to keep it up." Well, the fellow went on to become a great big star, and one day I pulled up alongside him and I tooted my horn, I said "Hi Dave, how are you?" And he said "Oh yeah hi um." And he drove off in his Rolls Royce.

MP: And who was that?

Ernie: What the heck is his name? Davidson, from "The Fugitive"? (David Janssen is the actor he is referring to)

MP: I'm interested on your impression of working with Joan Crawford in "Johnny Guitar". You'd done a lot of Western work but Joan was much more a veteran of dramatic roles. How was the whole process of working with her?

Ernie: Well, I'll tell you, she made you believe it. She did make you believe it, by golly. She was Johnny Guitar's girl, and no doubt about it. And she had poor Mercedes McCambridge so buffaloed, that when McCambridge was holding up that pistol ready to shoot her, she couldn't do it, she just couldn't get that pistol up in order to shoot at her. Finally, they said "Cut. And what do we got here?" But she'd already called her every name in the book, Joan had already called Mercedes every name in the book, besides being a fishwife, poor girl was buffaloed, she didn't know. (Laughs). Oh boy. But she was quite a gal. She'd come in at 4 o'clock in the morning, they'd do her make up and everything else, and by 8 o'clock she was ready, BOOM, prompt, and knew all her lines and stepped in there and did it.

MP: Very professional.

Ernie: Yep yep.

MP: I know that you wanted to work constantly, and so you expanded your range from "The Mob" to Fatso Judson in "From Here to Eternity" to "Marty" and so on. But did you prefer a specific type of film, for example, a drama to a Western, or a crime film to a comedy?

Ernie: I would have done a Western anytime. Because, I don't know, there's something about Westerns, even today, it's one of the most wonderful things in the world. You've got a horse to ride on, you don't have to kill yourself all the time, and it's marvelous. When you're not working, you're laying around there, there's some people taking care of your horse and you're taking it easy. With this murder thing, you've always got a gun in your hand and you're ready to shoot somebody. Same thing in a Western of course but in a Western it's more fun. There's just something about it that made it good, it was more fun working in a Western than anywhere else.

MP: Let me rattle off some names to you. Frank Sinatra, Monty Clift, Gary Cooper, Spencer Tracy, Bette Davis, Burt Lancaster, and the list goes on. Can you choose a favorite co-star?

Ernie: Oh sure. I would say Frank Sinatra or Gary Cooper. And of course, without a doubt, I would say, Spencer Tracy as well. But Gary Cooper, in my estimation, he was the tops. That boy knew it all. You watch him and you were watching people, somebody that had worked that really was honest and true unto himself. He was really following Shakespeare, that boy.

MP: I read a line where you said that Clark Gable's line "Frankly My Dear, I don't give a damn" changed the way things were written, and almost inadvertently brought the use of profanity into film. Do you feel morality has been sacrificed for the sake of a good story?

Ernie: I tell you, in the olden days, you didn't have to swear. There was no swearing whatsoever. But when Clark Gable did it, of course it was written in the book and he followed the book. But people took advantage of it. They said "Oh my God, he swore!" And then of course BAM! It opened up the flood gates in my estimation and there it was. And it wasn't that bad at the beginning, and now you get every four letter word in the book and then some. And it all comes to what? To nothing, because of the fact I don't think the writers are really writing good today as they did yesteryear when they used to be able to write a whole sentence without adding an expletive to it.

MP: Now that is interesting that you say that because I'd like to know your opinion. Are there any legends any more? Are there people today that you feel will be looked back on years from now, as legendary actors and actresses?

Ernie: Yes there is, like a fellow like Gary Sinise. I think he is a heck of an actor. Another one is Kevin Kline. Kevin Kline is another one, who is just marking time, that poor soul, because of the fact that he can't find a good show to be in. When you first saw him, he was playing a wonderful guy who came in out of nowhere and played the President of the United States. And it was wonderful, and I think there is so much that could be done for those fellows. Gary Sinise, of course, has his own show, CSI (CSI: NY), but I'm sure he'd like to be able to make motion pictures and do the things that he'd really like to do. But again, the writing is for the birds.

MP: Talk a little bit about your new autobiography. You've seen it all, you've done it all. It must have been quite an undertaking to condense a lifetime of experience into a book.

Ernie: I never wanted to make a book, I never did. But I have a friend who's also, fellow who sets all this stuff up, press agent is what he is, and he stuck this thing under my nose and said, "Come on, start talking. I know you got it in you. We can tell all these stories and everything else of people that you know and we can make a book out of it." And I said, "You're crazy. Who the heck wants to hear these stories that I've got to tell and everything else?" And he said, "There will be a lot of people." Well, I'm very happy to say that the next booking that they have, the next printing that they have, it's coming out with a thing on it saying 'one of the best books of the year'. And it's wonderful to hear. But I never thought that we would have that kind of an opportunity to do what we set out to do. People write me letters, you wouldn't believe the letters I've received from people that are just enamored of the book. It's amazing.

MP: If you were to watch an actor giving an acceptance speech after winning an Academy Award and they thanked Ernest Borgnine for inspiring them to begin an acting career. How would that make you feel?

Ernie: Well, I tell you, I'd probably feel very, very good. I've had people come up to me say that you've inspired me and you've done this and that and you've helped me and I appreciate it. And they didn't have to win an Academy Award. I appreciated just the thought of them coming up to me and saying you're the one that gave me the inspiration to become an actor and what they term to be a good actor. And I think it's wonderful because you're hearing it from your peers.

MP: And do you still enjoy acting as much today as you did when you first started?

Ernie: No. No, we had directors in those days that...there are still some good directors around, don't get me wrong. But today it's everything to fill that little tiny thing they look into, that metal box that they look into and see the scene. They

don't look anymore to see the interplay between the actors anymore. They don't look to see if the man's eyes are looking at another man's eyes and saying those lines and meaning them. Today it's bam bam, and 'yakka yakka yakka yakka', and oh we finished, I'll say mine, 'yakka yakka yakka yakka', that's it, it's a good scene, ok, cut, print. As long as it fits in that screen, cut, print and let's send it out. And to me, it's the worst thing in the world because you want something that comes from actors that makes them believe, that makes people believe in this sort of stuff. The last thing that I did for TV that I got a nomination for, a Golden Globe nomination was "A Grandpa for Christmas". What a wonderful little group who all interacted, but they were all older actors. We only had one little girl who played a beautiful part, and she too got that wonderful feeling just from working with us. And it was wonderful to watch. And I enjoyed it because we had a good director who knew exactly what he wanted and BAM, whether he was looking through that little square or not, that's what it's all about, and "let's do it again kids and let's do it right." And so we did, and we did it right. Well, like this man said to me one time, "You're the best actor I've ever worked with." And I thanked him very much.

MP: Once again I've been speaking with Ernest Borgnine, not only a legendary actor, but obviously a gentleman. Ernie, again, thank you so much for your time, congratulations on a great career and please keep entertaining us.

Ernie: God Bless you Sir, and I wish you the best in 2009, the best.

MP: Thanks so much.

Ernie: Bye Bye.

I'd like to offer my sincere appreciation to Ernest Borgnine and Sarah at TCM for helping to coordinate the interview. [Click here to purchase Ernie's book Ernie: The Autobiography.](#)