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Celebrating 'a Monument'

By NICOLAS RAPOLD

In the 1961 drama "Something Wild," a Bronx college student flees her family after being raped in a park and begins a new life in anonymity. Rescued from near suicide, she ends up in a strange limbo in her savior's basement apartment. Starring Carroll Baker and Ralph Meeker, the film is tense with the lurching energy and physicality of Method acting, the action framed by a bustling metropolis with gritty beauty but sometimes grotesque inhabitants. It's one of American cinema's more unusual studies of trauma in all its bluntness and unfathomability, and in that, it is perhaps above all a film by Jack Garfein.

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Daniella Zalcman for The Wall Street Journal

Director Jack Garfein in the Film Forum's projection room

"Something Wild" and Mr. Garfein's other movie, 1957's "The Strange One," will screen on Sunday and Monday as part of a two-day tribute at Film Forum. The curious pair of pictures may seem a small oeuvre to celebrate, but they came from a man of the theater who was at ground zero during the acting revolution of Strasberg, Kazan, et al. A key figure in New York's Actors Studio, Mr. Garfein would direct "End As a Man," the Calder Willingham play that would become "The Strange One."

Before his career in theater (which lasted decades) and behind the camera, he had endured a lifetime of drama in Europe during World War II—in the concentration camps where he and his family had been transported from their native Slovakia. Freed from Bergen-Belsen in 1945, he eventually made his way to an uncle in the U.S., and worked his way up in the world of the stage.

"I never discussed it at the time with the other actors. They knew that I came from a war. Most of them were veterans from the war as well," Mr. Garfein, 80 years old, said over drinks at the Algonquin—down the street from the Actors Studio, where he taught a master class earlier this week. "Also I never dwelt on it. I think my wanting to be in the theater and wanting to act and to direct was because it was all a subconscious drive. Later, I understood it better: I could feel things under theater conditions."

His classmates at the studio included Tony Curtis, Walter Matthau and Rod Steiger, and among those he would soon direct (on stage or screen) would be Ben Gazzara, William Smithers, Pat Hingle, Arthur Storch, George Peppard and James Dean.

"Professionally, he discovered me," said the actor Bruce Dern, who worked on productions with Mr. Garfein. "He was a wonder kid when I met him. The man is a monument."

Mr. Garfein's adventuresome direction is on permanent display in the work showing at Film Forum. In "The Strange One," for example, Mr. Gazzara leads an ensemble as Jocko de Paris, a sadistic upperclassman at a Southern military academy amid a charged atmosphere of homoeroticism and grueling hierarchy.

"We were going to shoot it on location. The Jim Crow laws were in existence," Mr. Garfein recalled of the production. "One night I saw this train with black cotton workers coming back from the South, jam-packed. It reminded me a bit of my own experience in the war." The sight inspired a train scene that led to crossed swords with producer Sam Spiegel.

Aiming for greater independence, Mr. Garfein made "Something Wild" with United Artists. The strange confinement drama—whose star, Ms. Baker, was married to Mr. Garfein at the time—features music by Aaron Copland and cinematography by an earlier émigré: the Academy Award-winning Eugene Schuftan, who had shot films for Siodmak, G.W. Pabst, Ophuls and others and designed special effects for Lang's "Metropolis."

Film Forum's tribute will also include a 1987 documentary that shows the Slovakian-born Mr. Garfein returning to his hometown of Bardejov. If the events of the war had furnished fuel for the artist's unconscious, they clearly remained vivid, painful memories, then and now. In conversation this week, Mr. Garfein returned to his misunderstanding of his mother's efforts to save him upon arrival at Auschwitz, and a moment in the run-up to their separation.

"She combed my sister's hair, straightened her dress out and my sweater, put lipstick on," Mr. Garfein remembers, acting out the motions.

"The unfortunate paradox is that his ability to have insights and to share his experiences with others doesn't lessen the pain for him," says Herschel Garfein, the director's son with Ms. Baker, and a classical composer.

Fifty years after his last movie, Mr. Garfein is working on a new screenplay drawing on his Auschwitz memories and his observations of relations within the camps between Hungarian and Polish Jews. (A book, "Life and Acting," was released last fall.) At the moment, he is workshopping an adaptation of Kafka's short story "A Report to an Academy" and works in Paris, where he runs his own teaching studio.

"Probably France touched something in my life because it is like Czechoslovakia was before the war. You don't see any of the damages of the war," he said. "But I have to come home, which is here, New York. It's my source."

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