

FAITH IN THE SYSTEM

Although he only made two films, Jack Garfein, a central figure at the Actors Studio, is finally starting to enjoy the acclaim he deserves

By Clyde Jeavons

In July 2007, the aficionados at the Il Cinema Ritrovato film festival sat down to watch a 1957 black-and-white American feature many of them had never heard of, by a director whose name was equally obscure. I was particularly curious because I recalled, as a teenager, having seen the film on its release, in a double-bill, and remembered it as one of the movies that had a profound effect on my formative critical sense, mainly for its strikingly different acting style: my first conscious encounter with the Method.

The version I had seen was called *End as a Man*: a hothouse melodrama set in a sadistic Southern military academy, about a psychopathic cadet called Jocko De Paris. Bologna's pristine restoration was now titled, rather vapidly, *The Strange One*, starring Ben Gazzara in his film debut. Gazzara, who had played the part of Jocko on stage, was a member of the Actors Studio, and what we were watching (pace Brando) was the *über*-Method actor of his generation. Gazzara, then 76 years old, had been invited to present *The Strange One* at Bologna. He was asked about the little-known director of the film, Jack Garfein. Had they kept in touch? Gazzara said no, he hadn't heard from him in a long time – he presumed he was dead.

As programme adviser for the Treasures from the Archives section of the BFI's London Film Festival, I selected *The Strange One* for inclusion in that year's festival. Shortly after the programme was announced, the LFF staff received a telephone call from Paris in which, roughly précised, a gruff voice announced: "Hello, my name is Jack Garfein. I hear you're showing my film. Can I come and see it?" Garfein came, presented his film, and talked about Gazzara, the Actors Studio – of which he too had been a member – and the Method, even though it was a term he disliked. He was the same age as Gazzara. He also spoke about another film he had made, which barely anyone was aware of – at least in the UK – called *Something Wild*, a prescient drama from 1961 about rape, which starred two more Studio alumni, Carroll Baker (whom Garfein married) and Ralph Meeker. This was screened in the LFF in 2012, with Garfein again present. Gazzara, meanwhile, had died.

Garfein made only these two feature films – hence his comparative invisibility to cinema-goers over the past 50-odd years. Too punctilious and single-minded to tolerate the exigencies and commercially driven compromises of studio filmmaking, his preference was for stage direction, which he had learned at the Actors Studio – with mentors such as Harold Clurman, Elia Kazan and Lee Strasberg – and he subsequently devoted himself to the theatre and teaching acting, commuting (as he continues to do) between



Trapped: Carroll Baker in *Something Wild* (1961)

New York and Paris. Despite his long absence from film production, however, and thanks partly to the restoration and critical reassessment of his two movies – which have deservedly achieved minor cult status – Garfein has enjoyed late recognition as a visionary filmmaker.

Garfein's enduring career and longevity are all the more remarkable when one considers his backstory. Born a Czech in 1930, the son of a relatively prosperous Jewish timber merchant, he found himself a citizen of the Nazi-supported breakaway puppet state of Slovakia after Hitler's invasion, and thus a prey to persecution and eventual deportation, sanctioned and carried out by the Slovakian government. "First they took a Jew's gold, if any," Garfein later recalled, "then his possessions, then his property, then his identity, until he became a nonperson." Some of his family were sent straight to Auschwitz-Birkenau. He and his mother and sister escaped to Hungary to join his father, only to be caught later when Hungary's Jews were rounded up. At Auschwitz, he survived by lying about his age (face to face with Mengele, no less) and by the selfless actions of others, including his doomed mother. By sheer luck, he survived 11 death camps, until

his relief by the British at Bergen-Belsen in April 1945, when he was 14. His entire immediate family of some 20 souls had been wiped out.

At the age of 15, Garfein was brought to the United States by a distant uncle. He says the only English he could speak was: "British soldiers good. White bread, please." In 1985-86, at the age of 55, he was the subject of a CBS documentary, *A Journey Back*, which even now – amid a flood of Holocaust testimony – stands out as one of the most vivid, raw and moving personal accounts of the concentration camp experience ever put on record. In it, he revisits a snow-covered Auschwitz and describes in painful detail its murderous banality. Later, there is an extraordinary episode in Hamilton, Ontario, in which he encounters the Slovak administrator from his hometown of Bardejov – now a pillar of the immigrant community – who had instigated and supervised the transportation of the local Jewish population "on state orders": essentially, a war criminal. The man "remembers little" and lies about his direct involvement. All Garfein seeks is not revenge, but the truth, hoping to provoke shame and find absolution, neither of which is forthcoming.

In the US, the young Garfein was determined

to be an actor, and after directing and performing in a one-act play at the orphanage where he had been placed, he applied to Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop, which he still regards as America's finest training ground for actors and directors at the time. With help from a couple of influential sponsors, he won two years' scholarship at the Workshop. At 17, he was the youngest in an acting class that included Tony Curtis (then Bernie Schwartz), Rod Steiger and Walter Matthau. Because of his energy on stage and his improvisatory skills, Piscator saw in him a director rather than an actor, much to Garfein's dismay ("Directors to me were failed actors. Directing was a clerical job"). Strasberg, who ran the directing class, agreed with Piscator and persuaded Garfein to make the change.

Strasberg was also Garfein's gateway to the Actors Studio. Strasberg, with Clurman and Cheryl Crawford, had formed the Group Theatre in the early 30s, producing an array of meaningful plays by gifted writers such as Clifford Odets, and attracting some of the most talented actors of that era, some of whom became influential acting teachers: Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Robert Lewis. It was also the breeding-ground for future directors and film stars: Kazan began there as a young actor, along with John Garfield and Franchot Tone. Strasberg, a follower of Stanislavski's teachings, was in charge of the Group's acting sessions, but many of the actors disagreed with Strasberg's emotive 'inner-self' approach to the craft of acting and his interpretation of Stanislavski's intentions. There are a number of variations on the famous story of how Adler, a particular sceptic when it came to Strasberg, responded to Strasberg's instruction, during an acting exercise, to cut a lime: "Do you want me to cut it like a real lime, or an imaginary one?" Strasberg walked out, never to return. The Group was dissolved in the late 30s as its leading members were offered profitable Hollywood contracts and international fame.

In 1947, out of the ashes of the Group Theatre, Kazan, Crawford and Robert Lewis formed the Actors Studio. Kazan said its purpose was "to get actors out of the rain": a place where "we, the directors, are guides, there to bring out the best in the actors"; where actors could try things out and discover their potential without pressure from outside. "Here," says Garfein, "you had the most experienced actors inspired by talented newcomers, and they in turn by the experienced actors' perceptiveness – an amazing concept in the preparation of the art." One of the problems was Strasberg, who, as Kazan became busy directing films and Broadway productions, was invited in with the proviso that he was not to attempt his private or 'emotional' exercises, but simply to moderate the acting sessions.

Nonetheless, in 1951 Strasberg became a director of the Studio and is still perceived as its main proponent and mentor – perhaps even a guru – to the many brilliant actors who "came out of the rain", despite their ambivalence towards his teaching methods. Garfein, for his part, had applied to join the Actors Studio via the American Theater Wing, as part of a directors' training scheme that favoured veterans of the Korean War, sponsored by the GI Bill. Garfein announced



Water torture: Ben Gazzara (centre) and Paul E. Richards in *The Strange One* (aka *End as a Man*, 1957)

himself as a 'veteran' of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, a shock tactic which worked: he was accepted. In fact, he was the only successful candidate, but he had first to impress Strasberg with demonstrations of his directing skills. This he did with a partial adaptation of Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, followed by a New York production of *The Lady of the Camellias*. These earned Garfein a year's probation at the Studio, during which time he had to direct a play under Studio conditions. The outcome was a critically acclaimed stage adaptation of *End as a Man*, with Gazzara in the lead role, as a result of which Garfein was the first director to be voted in as a lifetime member of the Studio; up to that point, only actors could become life members.

At the age of 22, Garfein had achieved one of his ambitions: to be part of the Actors Studio. "The Studio was the only place to be in 1950," he is quoted as saying in Foster Hirsch's definitive book, *A Method to Their Madness: The History of the Actors Studio* (its title echoing Robert Lewis's earlier account, *Method or Madness*, which is said to have given the Studio's acting style its keyword: as mentioned, Garfein rejects the term as too glib, preferring Stanislavski's 'System', his antidote to 'inspiration', which supposedly drove former great

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Jack Garfein: 'Acting is life and life is acting'

actors such as Edmund Kean and Eleonora Duse). "The best of the Broadway people were there, and being there meant a certain kind of recognition. The actors had an ewase and humanity, and twice each week they illuminated something in [a] play which hadn't been touched before. I felt these people had gotten close to the spirit of Stanislavski's book, *An Actor Prepares*, which had been the original spark for me. To me, acting is life and life is acting, which is what I try to teach."

Garfein was as ambivalent about Strasberg as his contemporaries at the Studio. They clashed frequently over teaching and directing methodology. Strasberg's genius, he says, was reflected in his ability to recognise actors' innate talent and their potential, which they themselves were unaware of, be they Dean or Brando. He had the astonishing ability to define how through their craft actors were able to reveal the inner meaning of a character, thereby illuminating the play. As Proust said, actors are able to create a masterpiece within a masterpiece – that is, a performance within a play. Garfein gives, as a parallel example, his idol Laurence Olivier's *tour de force* as Archie Rice in John Osborne's *The Entertainer*. Strasberg gave actors confidence, morale and a sense of their own proper importance. But the process by which he strove to achieve practical results (his introspective 'exercises'), Garfein felt was entirely misguided, bordering on the ignorant. He also considered Strasberg's obvious attraction to celebrity and fame, which drew the likes of Marilyn Monroe to the Studio, a betrayal of the Studio ethos.

After he had tested the waters of film direction and found them wanting, Garfein embarked on a successful career as a theatre director, earning acclaim for his productions of Seán O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* and the plays of Arthur Miller and Samuel Beckett. In 1966, he founded (with Paul Newman) a branch of the Actors Studio in Los Angeles, and today he continues to teach Method acting and directing in Paris, New York and London; his book on the subject, *Life and Acting*, appeared in 2010. [↪](#)

i Jack Garfein will talk about his life and work with Clyde Jeavons at BFI Southbank, London, on 27 November