

Until he was cast in the role of former light-heavyweight Terry Malloy for last summer's two-night performance of Budd Schulberg's ON THE WATERFRONT in Hoboken, Jason Cerbone's most noteworthy fight experience had come in the men's room of the Bada Bing Club, where James Gandolfini beat him within an inch of his life in a 2001 episode of "The Sopranos."

So how convincing is Cerbone as a boxer? It's difficult to tell one way or the other from the brief fight clip included in Garry Pastore's WAITING FOR BUDD, but Cerbone seems to show a decent jab, effective enough that despite giving away close to a hundred pounds and clutching a script in his right hand, he still had Big Pussy backing up.

And the best part of it was, Budd Schulberg got to watch him do it.

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WAITING FOR BUDD had its debut screening on October 29, the final night of the New York International Film Festival, and was enthusiastically received by a select audience that included several members of the Schulberg family, festival judges, and much of the cast. A splendid little gem, WAITING is on one level a documentary about the making of a play and on another a tribute to its iconic author, who attended the second and final night of the star-crossed Hoboken production barely a week before his death. And if one has created the impression that WAITING FOR BUDD might be characterized in some quarters as "The Sopranos" meets "On The Waterfront," in the words of George Foreman, "they're only saying that 'cause it's true."

The four principal male leads -- Cerbone (Terry), Vincent Pastore (Johnny Friendly), Al Sapienza (Charlie) and Robert Funaro (Father Barry) -- are all veterans of the classic HBO series. Both Cerbone's (Jackie Aprile Jr.) and Vincent Pastore's (Salvatore "Big Pussy" Bonpensiero) characters met unfortunate demises as the victims of mob hits, while Funaro's (Eugene Pontecorvo) hung himself in despair after an unsuccessful attempt to resign from the family business. At least two other "Waterfront" cast members, Garry Pastore (who in addition to directing and co-producing WAITING FOR BUDD, played Big Mac in the Hoboken play), and Arthur Nascarella (Pop Doyle) had also had prior "Sopranos" roles.

(Lest we appear guilty of profiling here, it might also be noted that 11 members of the 19-character "Waterfront" cast, including Robin Paul, who played Edie Doyle, have also been featured in various incarnations of "Law and Order," whose bad guys are less ethno-specific.)

In another of those serendipitous degrees of separation, just a year before Rod Steiger (the original Charlie) passed away in 2001, Sapienza, the Hoboken Charlie, had portrayed Steiger's son in "A Month of Sundays."

The casting, in fact, appears to have been in many cases the outcome of a series of a happy accidents, since most of the actors were chosen following open auditions at the Mayfair Hotel

## THE KIMBALL CHRONICLES: Waiting For Budd

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on June 25. ("Who wouldn't want to do 'On the Waterfront?'" noted Garry Pastore, who was inspired by the response to the casting call to corral the cameras and record subsequent proceedings on film.)

The New Artists Theatre Company had been founded by Vincent Pastore, Licato, and Puccio. Cousin Garry was there to read Father Barry's and Terry's lines back to the other actors. The deaths that day of Michael Jackson and Farrah Fawcett cast something of a pall on the proceedings among the show-biz crowd.

"Then Chuck Zito arrived, insisting that he wanted to play Terry Malloy," recalled Pastore. "Now, Chuck is this huge, muscle-bound guy who's sixty years old (only 57, actually) and he's gonna play Terry? and I told ["Waterfront" director) Frank Licato "we really ought to be filming this.

"I just found it so hysterical that Chuck wanted to play Terry," recalled Pastore. "It planted the seed about shooting footage, because I was sort of amused by the cast of characters who kept coming in to audition. Some were good and some not so good, but they all had heart and gave it their best shot."

Once filming began, the bulk of the task fell to Fokke Baarsen, a Dutch student at the New York Film Academy, who initially hired on as a production assistant/intern with the Hudson Film Group, but proved to be so valuable that he was in the end listed as Cinematographer and Film Editor for Waiting For Budd.

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Rehearsals took place in New York on July 8th and 15th.

The script used was not Schulberg's Oscar-winning screenplay but a stage version written for an ill-fated Broadway run a decade and a half ago that lasted only slightly longer than the two-night stand in Hoboken last July. In the Broadway version, for which Stan Silverman shared writing credit with Schulberg, the 'incidental music' was composed by David Amram. Ron Eldard ("Doubt") played Terry and David Morse Father Barry, while Charlie was portrayed by -- you gotta love this -- James Gandolfini.

When that play closed after just eight performances, the \$2.5 million it cost its backers was at the time a Broadway record for non-musicals.

Last summer's concept was to use professional actors in a staged reading, and in a unique setting -- on the same New Jersey waterfront where Schulberg's original masterpiece had been set, and where the 1954 movie had been filmed, but it was not without its own difficulties. Pastore's partner, executive producer Deborah Mello became so ill she was hospitalized a week before opening night.

In advance of the performance, the local media had been invited over for a 'press' day at the waterfront stage, where several members of the cast would be made available for interviews. When the appointed time arrived, not a single newspaper or television station showed up. Only later did Pastore learn that they had all been pulled off the story to deal with the bombshell

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events of the day -- that Hoboken Mayor Peter Cammarata had been among those taken down on corruption charges that morning.

"Here we were doing a play about corruption on the waterfront in Hoboken and our press day gets spoiled because the mayor was busted for corruption," Pastore noted the irony.

Following just a couple of weeks of rehearsal, the July 28th opening night al fresco performance, with the New York skyline serving as a backdrop, was by all accounts a success. Had the second night proceeded so seamlessly, admitted Pastore, "we probably wouldn't have had a movie," but mother nature intervened to provide the dramatic tension necessary to drive the second half of the 30-minute film.

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On July 29th, 2009 the entire metropolitan area was besieged by a day-long monsoon of biblical proportions. Their faces glued to the screen, Pastore and Licato looked like a couple of guys trying to read tea leaves as they hopefully stared at a Doppler radar screen in a fruitless search for a break in the weather.

Waterfowl were already swimming around in what would have been the stage. Puddles several inches deep had formed on the seats from which the audience would have watched, in the unlikely event an audience had braved the rainstorms at all.

"This is not good," Pastore reflected as he watched the ducks swim in the newly formed pools on the stage. "This is not comforting."

By early afternoon it had become apparent that the performance would have to be canceled unless a suitable indoor location could be procured on short notice.

Someone came up with a small auditorium -- to be precise, it was the physics lecture auditorium at Stevens College, but upon reaching that venue, Licato realized that it would be hopelessly inadequate.

"I hate it. We're going to have to cancel," the play's director sighed to the film's director. At that point Pastore reminded Licato that Budd Schulberg was already on his way to Hoboken.

"Budd's coming? He's definitely coming here?" Licato seemed to immediately reconsider. "I guess even if we have to play just to Budd, we have to do it."

There seemed to be little choice in the matter.

"The show must go on, right?" agreed Garry.

At this point Licato asked about sound and lighting equipment. Both, it turned out, had been delivered to the school by truck a few hours earlier, but Vincent Pastore made a unilateral decision to send the gear back to Uncle Junior.

## THE KIMBALL CHRONICLES: Waiting For Budd

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"We'd been setting up the stage, Vin and I with a few wooden kegs and crates set for dressing, and a sound guy moved the set dressing to put up this big, ugly oversized speaker that looked like it could be used for a Stones concert," recalled Garry Pastore.

Lapsing into his Big Pussy mode, "Vinny pretty much told him to take a [bleepng] hike," said Garry. "Maybe it wasn't in the nicest tone or choice of words, but it was actually very comical. I wished I'd had the cameras rolling then, but if I had, Vinny probably would have smashed it at that point."

"The rain was coming down so hard you couldn't even ask anyone to stand there with a sign to redirect the audience," recalled Garry Pastore. "Besides, who would have seen it?"

Rounding up the cast proved equally challenging. Some of them had been informed, erroneously, that the performance had already been scrapped. Many of the actors lived in Manhattan, a circumstance which was complicated by the fact that the tunnels were flooding and the George Washington Bridge was hopelessly backed up.

At the Lincoln Tunnel it was even worse than that. With police limiting traffic to a single line of vehicles, all of mid-Manhattan had succumbed to gridlock. Facing a delay of several hours, Funaro resorted to ingenuity. Donning Fr. Barry's collar, he explained to the cops that he was due to give last rites to Runty Nolan and say a Mass in Hoboken. (Which was, in one sense, true.) In light of this clerical emergency, his car was escorted to the head of the line and Funaro was shortly on his way to Jersey.

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The lecture hall had a capacity of 200. Somehow, the word got around in Hoboken, and the show was completely sold out, with standing room only. Budd Schulberg, accompanied by his son Benn, was a late arrival, and was introduced to a standing ovation by the audience.

"The people were in absolute awe of him," said Pastore.

So was the cast.

"To be able to perform in front of an icon like Budd Schulberg -- and to think that it almost didn't happen, Wow!" marveled Robin Paul.

"It was like Burbridge reciting the words back to Shakespeare," said Joe Dandry. "The fact that I was able to do that is something I'll never forget."

Word trickled backstage that Schulberg appeared to be "beaming" as he watched the show. When the Oscar winner (and Hall of Fame boxing writer) was later asked about the Hoboken production, he said, "I thought they did an excellent job. I was very pleased."

Schulberg autographed programs for those who had braved the storm to attend that night. One of them had the temerity to ask him to compare Jason Cerbone's Terry to Marlon Brando's.

## THE KIMBALL CHRONICLES: Waiting For Budd

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Schulberg resisted the temptation to answer "he coulda been a contender."

"Well, nobody's ever been as good as Brando," Budd replied with a soft chuckle. "But I liked what (Cerbone) did with it very much."

Eight days later the 95 year-old Schulberg was dead.

"We got to perform 'On the Waterfront' in front of Budd Schulberg for the last time," said Garry Pastore, "and what started out as really an incredibly shitty day turned into a night I never, ever will forget, not in my lifetime."

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"For some odd reason, this play was meant to be done, and this little film was meant to be made. Where it goes from here is anybody's guess," said Pastore.

For the nonce, Pastore's plan is to continue entering WAITING FOR BUDD in film festivals here and abroad. The eventual hope is that it will wind up on television, if not on HBO, Showtime, or PBS, then at least "on a station that really cares about Budd and his legacy, said Pastore. "I know it's a longshot, but if we could win a few awards, maybe we could go for the granddaddy of them all. Since this film is dedicated to Budd, wouldn't bringing home one more Oscar for him be a perfect addition to his legacy?"

"As our tagline goes, 'Some things are just meant to be.'"