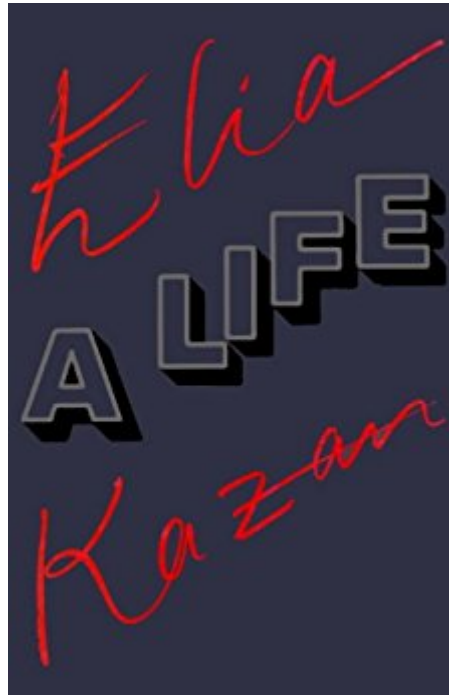




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# Elia Kazan: A Life



## Synopsis

“This is the best autobiography I’ve read by a prominent American in I don’t know how many years. It is endlessly absorbing and I believe this is because it concerns a man who is looking to find a coherent philosophy that will be tough enough to contain all that is ugly in his person and his experience, yet shall prove sufficiently compassionate to give honest judgment on himself and others. Somehow, the author brings this off. Elia Kazan: A Life has that candor of confession which is possible only when the deepest wounds have healed and honesty can achieve what honesty so rarely arrives at—a rich and hearty flavor. By such means, a famous director has written a book that offers the kind of human wealth we find in a major novel.”—Norman Mailer

In this amazing autobiography, Kazan at seventy-eight brings to the undiluted telling of his story—and revelation of himself—all the passion, vitality, and truth, the almost outrageous honesty, that have made him so formidable a stage director (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Death of a Salesman*, *All My Sons*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Tea and Sympathy*), film director (*On the Waterfront*, *East of Eden*, *Gentleman’s Agreement*, *Splendor in the Grass*, *Baby Doll*, *The Last Tycoon*, *A Face in the Crowd*), and novelist (the number-one best-seller *The Arrangement*.) Kazan gives us his sense of himself as an outsider (a Greek rug merchant’s son born in Turkey, an immigrant’s son raised in New York and educated at Williams College). He takes us into the almost accidental sojourn at the Yale Drama School that triggered his commitment to theatre, and his edgy, exciting apprenticeship with the new and astonishing Group Theatre, as stagehand and stage manager—and as actor (*Waiting for Lefty*, *Golden Boy*) . . . his first nervous and then successful attempts at directing for theatre and movies (*The Skin of Our Teeth*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*) . . . his return to New York to co-found the Actors Studio (and his long and ambivalent relationship with Lee Strasberg) . . . his emergence as premier director on both coasts. With his director’s eye for the telling scene, Kazan shares the joys and complications of production, his unique insights on acting, directing, and producing. He makes us feel the close presence of the actors, producers, and writers he’s worked with—James Dean, Marlon Brando, Tennessee Williams, Vivien Leigh, Tallulah Bankhead, Sam Spiegel, Darryl Zanuck, Harold Clurman, Arthur Miller, Budd Schulberg, James Baldwin, Clifford Odets, and John Steinbeck among them. He gives us a frank and affectionate portrait of Marilyn Monroe. He talks with startling candor about himself as husband and—in the years where he obsessively sought adventure outside marriage—as lover. For the first time, he discusses his Communist Party years and his wrenching decision in 1952 to be a cooperative witness before HUAC. He writes about his birth as a writer. The pace and organic drama

of his narrative, his grasp of the life and politics of Broadway and Hollywood, the keenness with which he observes the men and women and worlds around him, and, above all, the honesty with which he pursues and captures his own essence, make this one of the most fascinating autobiographies of our time.

## **Book Information**

File Size: 5855 KB

Print Length: 862 pages

Publisher: Knopf; 1st edition (October 16, 2011)

Publication Date: October 16, 2011

Sold by: Amazon Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B005U3UZYI

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #220,967 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #35

in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Arts & Photography > Theater > History & Criticism #79

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## **Customer Reviews**

Like the title of the book, Elia Kazan's autobiography is simple and direct. It is also powerful and often fascinating. The famed director of plays and movies like *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE* details his rise from a humble beginning in New York, so adept at the practical details of stagecraft he was given the nickname "Gadg" (for "gadget") which he bore all his life among friends. He ultimately became one of America's best and most successful directors, widely known and an influence on two generations of actors. Kazan's controversial role in "naming names" before federal investigators opened up a rift between him and some of his closest friends and associates; those interested in his life will want to read his take on this unnerving period of our history.

Recommended, especially for those interested in midcentury American theater and the many movies it spawned.

This is just about the most insightful book about the theatre, filmmaking and life in general that I have ever read. Is there self-justification here? Sure, but who wouldn't be guilty of that in their own story. Do I like the guy who emerged? Well, I am not so sure he did a lot of the time. He is scouring on his own faults and vanities. This was written late in his life and he doesn't hold back on the self-criticism. Kazan describes his Greek/Turkish forbears and how they came to America. He grew up feeling an outsider, a small guy who looked different; there was a pronounced chip. He studied drama at Yale and then became involved with the Group Theatre as he saw its virtues and its flaws. He worked to support himself and married Molly, a woman whose family had deep roots in America. She was loyal and supportive, they had children together, but he cheated on her although not unashamedly. Familiar names crop up throughout the book. He tells a good story and is splendidly gossipy, that old cowboy philosophy about never talking about the men you've killed or the women you've bedded didn't apply to Elia. The book would have been boring if it had. During the Depression, Kazan became a Communist, driven by an idealised vision of the working class. However Communist Party influence on the arts killed that idealism and he quit the party. He started as an actor, however his talents lay as a director. Success in the theatre led to offers from Hollywood. Although he needed help on the technical aspects of his first film "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn", Kazan learned fast and developed his own style. As WW2 entered its final phase, Kazan felt he was missing the defining experience of his generation. Through contacts he was sent to the Southwest Pacific theatre and got closer to combat than many in the rear areas. After the war he was instrumental in forming the Actors Studio and directed plays that are still seen as landmarks of theatre; "Death of a Salesman" and "A Streetcar Named Desire". He believed arrogance to be the driving force behind creativity, equating it with confidence. Kazan was arrogant. His description of a relationship he had with Marilyn Monroe reveals how older men of position and power in Hollywood zeroed in on her as he was one of them. Eventually he introduced her to Arthur Miller. For some, his decision to name names during the blacklist era in 1952 will be the most compelling part of the book. As Kazan tells it, pressure was brought to bear and he was close to kissing his film career goodbye. It cost him friends. Although he condemned the political

opportunism of the hearings, he states that he had become anti-communist, believing the Party had attempted to influence all forms of communication. Tellingly though, he finishes the section with, "Here I am, thirty-five years later, still worrying over it." Kazan felt that the films and plays that followed were his best work, shaped in part by the experience "On the Waterfront" was his revenge. He gives brilliant insights into all his movies, and in the telling Kazan rivals Niven. "The Moon is a Balloon" or "Bring on the Empty horses." He broke away from stage-bound studio productions and shot on location enduring the discomforts. His observations on people he knew throughout his career, Brando, Zanuck, Tennessee Williams, are as penetrating as a laser. His fortunes seesawed. He is honest about his mistakes with the Lincoln Centre Repertory Theatre. He returned to Turkey to exorcise demons in his most personal creation: "America America." There were other affairs and great tragedy; he bares his soul as he describes the death of Molly. Writing became more important than making movies; as a healing process, it proved more effective than psychoanalysis. He was troubled and thoughtful on the passing of his second wife and the death of friends. Although he knew he could not record the end of his life's journey, his own death, he wanted no mawkish memorial. References to Blacks, Jews, Catholics and WASPs may surprise; he knew some would consider him vulgar. A complex man, he needed to be tough and arrogant. Written 15 years before he died, few artists have left such a record; it's unique.

A marvelous, well-written, thoughtful, informative book. Worked on for more than a decade, and based on an earlier decade of fiction writing, it encompasses so much: the author's life and loves; his character assessments of dozens of Broadway and Hollywood moguls, producers, directors, and actors; his insights into the crafts of writing, directing and acting; his observations on how people live their lives and deal with death. I am grievously sad that I have now finished this book. I had hoped -- for selfish reasons -- to spread out its 800-plus pages over a longer period, but I kept coming back to it, and, over the past two days, have found myself mourning its impending end. Of the half dozen interesting, informative books on Hollywood in the Golden Age I've read over the past year -- and this includes two wonderful books by Budd Schulberg -- Elia Kazan's memoir is at the pinnacle.

i very much enjoyed reading kazan's autobiography. i am a kurd from turkey and was curious of his

take on the turks, the oppressors of greeks and kurds alike. the stories of his parents were one thing; those of his relatives, still living in turkey, were incredibly revealing. his movie, america, america, addresses some of the issues the greek faced in anatolia. but his cousin's ordeal in istanbul deserves a second movie as well. a bit long. but overall, a good read.

The sheer honesty of this autobiography is the most astonishing thing i took away from this book. The writing style is unassailable. Despite all his marital infidelities confessed, I came out loving him and wishing I had met him. What a man! How he went from a "disappointment" to one of the most respected theatre and film directors of the twentieth century, is an inspirational tale on its own. "Ignore any rejections," he writes at the end, "and do my best to live by my own standards, not hang my life on the esteem of others, not need their praise or need to achieve the accomplishments they expected from me and feel defeated when I didn't." The best book I have read in many years. As soon as I finished this autobiography, I ordered this author's other book: "The Arrangement." I'm afraid to start it for fear I might not do my work, once I start reading it. I am not a movie-going person, but I have to go watch some of his movies. Incredible life, Elia Kazan lived.

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