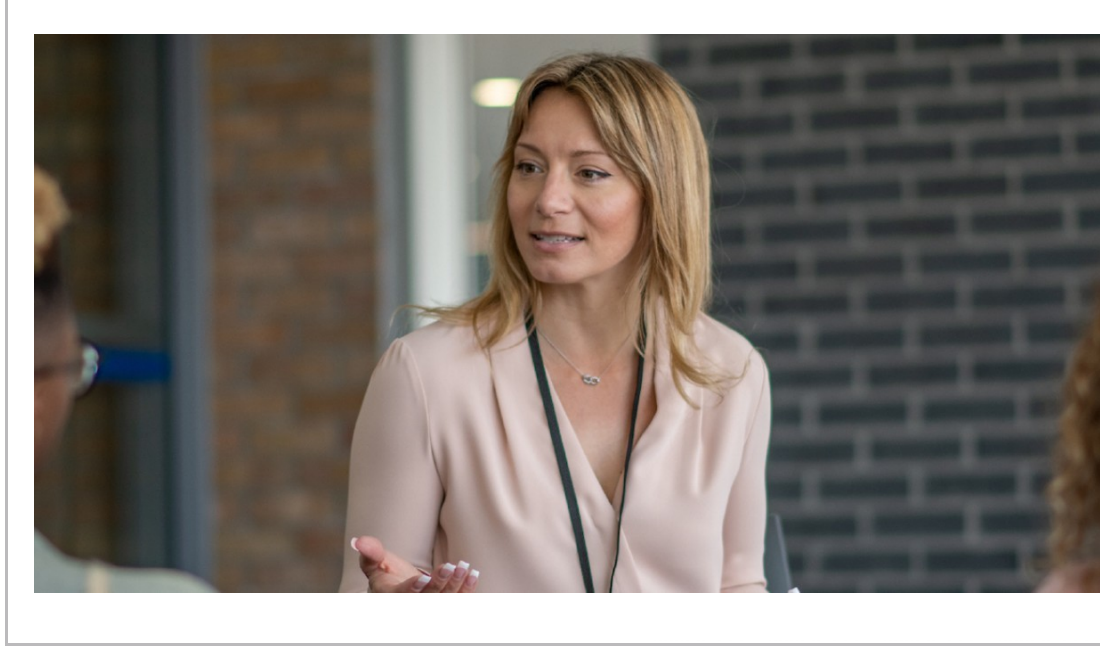



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Opinion



# 'Listen to Me Marlon' a revelatory documentary in actor's own voice

"I arrived in New York with holes in my socks and holes in my mind," Marlon Brando says, describing his transformative move east in 1943, a high school dropout training with acting god Stella Adler at the New School, leaving behind the Midwest and the military academy his father forced him to attend.



Documentary features clips of Marlon Brando's best work, including "A Streetcar Named Desire." (SHOWTIME)

by Steven Rea, Inquirer Movie Critic | Columnist  
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"I arrived in New York with holes in my socks and holes in my mind," Marlon Brando says, describing his transformative move east in 1943, a high school dropout training with acting god Stella Adler at the New School, leaving behind the Midwest and the military academy his father forced him to attend.

To hear Brando - Stanley Kowalski of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Terry Malloy of *On the Waterfront*, Vito Corleone of *The Godfather* - recount his own life story, his philosophy, is one of the great thrills of *Listen to Me Marlon*. Directed by Stevan Riley, this revelatory documentary boasts a narration by none other than the film's subject - culled from more than 200 hours of personal audio recordings (on reel-to-reel, cassettes, even answering-machine tapes), that Brando kept in his sprawling compound atop the Hollywood Hills.

If the sorry trajectory of Brando's last decades - the 1990s and early 2000s, when his son was convicted of manslaughter and his daughter committed suicide, when Brando's weight ballooned to 300 pounds - have tainted the actor's legacy, Riley's film brings the American icon's career back into sharp focus. To watch Brando in his 20s, brooding and magnetic, screaming "Stella!" at the top of his lungs or murmuring "I coulda been a contender" with all the sadness in the world, is to see one of the greatest film actors ever.

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Brando talks about his craft, about what he learned from Adler (and her mentor, Stanislavsky) about how to work with a camera and bring your experiences to bear on the roles you play. At times, he refers to himself in the third person, in excerpts from a series of "self-hypnosis" tapes (from which the documentary's title is taken). Trying to work a meditative calm out of the busy rumblings in his head, he whispers, "Marlon, just let go."

Not so easy.

*Listen to Me Marlon* is rich with clips of Brando's best work, from his debut as a paraplegic Army veteran in 1950's *The Men*, to the death scene in 1972's *The Godfather* (the Don with the orange rind in his mouth, mock-scaring his toddler grandson, then collapsing amid the tomato plants). Some of the actor's worst is on display, too, like the forced shenanigans of the Charlie Chaplin-directed farce *A Countess from Hong Kong*: Brando and Sophia Loren screwballing around a hotel room, terribly.

"How do you do that to yourself?" Brando asks in voice-over, full of shock and horror.

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And speaking of horror, Brando's bald and obese Col. Kurtz, the sweat-drenched warrior sage of 1979's *Apocalypse Now*, is seen delivering his "the horror, the horror" monologue, his face cast in shadow in Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam War epic. Riley chronicles the film's tumultuous production, the rift between director and star. And Brando talks with contempt about Coppola. Lacerating here, self-lacerating elsewhere.

It's a kick, too, to see what a cad and a charmer Brando was. Flush with the success of *On the Waterfront* and the Oscar that came with it, Brando hits the road for a press tour, to be interviewed by attractive TV newswomen in the boondocks (anywhere that's not New York or L.A.). He's incorrigible, turning on the smiles, turning the talk to the way his interviewer lets her hair fall over one eye, how her beautiful mouth turns up at one side.

Shameless, Marlon!

And brilliant.

EndText

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