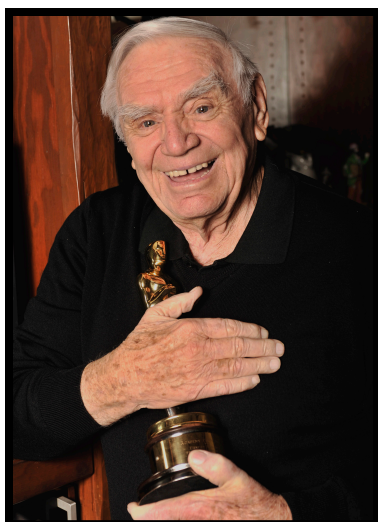


# Rise Of The Everyman



Ernest Borgnine with the Oscar he won for *Marty*.  
Photo Credit: John McCoy/ZUMA Press/Newscom  
(1/21/11)

## A Tribute to Ernest Borgnine by Jarrod Emerson

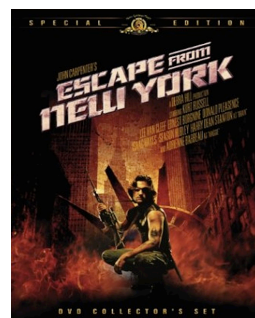
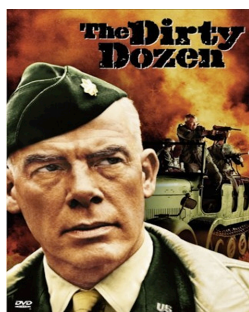
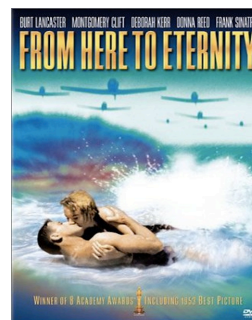
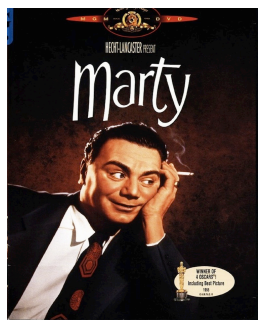
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In the 1995 comedy sequel *Grumpier Old Men*, “Jacob Goldman” (Kevin Pollack) mentions the name of an “available” woman to his lonely widower father “Max” (Walter Matthau). Upon hearing the woman’s name Max balks, replying, “She looks like Ernest Borgnine!” Having been born in the mid-1980’s I had no idea who Matthau’s character was referring to, but that would soon change. As my interest in cinema progressed, I began to notice the late actor popping up here and there. Eventually, two things occurred to me. Firstly, I am in complete agreement in that I wouldn’t be keen to date a woman who resembled Ernest Borgnine. Secondly, for anyone to remember Ernest Borgnine as “that homely actor” simply does not do him justice. He was one of Hollywood’s greatest – and long-lived – character actors, staying busy in film and television, right up to his death from heart failure last July at the age of 95.

Perhaps best remembered as “McHale” from the beloved sitcom *McHale’s Navy*, that role was but the tip of the iceberg in terms of Borgnine’s capabilities. Over the course of six decades, Borgnine forged a richly diverse film career as he collaborated with multiple generations of talented filmmakers. His Academy Award for the heartwarming 1955 film *Marty* helped pave the way for future generations of immensely talented character actors. To pay tribute to Borgnine, I have viewed the following highlights of his massive filmography:

***Convoy***  
***The Dirty Dozen***  
***Escape From New York***  
***From Here To Eternity***  
***Marty***  
***The Poseidon Adventure***  
***The Wild Bunch***

## The following Borgnine films are must-sees!



**Marty 1955, ★★★★★** New York butcher “Marty Piletti” (Borgnine) is 34, single, and still living with his mother. Unlovely, but good-hearted, Marty is lonely and everyone around him knows it. One night, Marty wanders through the Stardust Ballroom with his friend “Angie” (Joe Mantell). Surrounded by dancing, flirtatious couples, Marty is a fish out of water. That is until he meets schoolteacher “Clara”(Betsy Blair), an equally plain-looking, lonely woman abandoned by her date. Is it possible that Marty has a chance to leave bachelorhood behind?

*Marty* proved to be the role of a lifetime for Borgnine. Working from Paddy Chayefsky’s screenplay, Borgnine helped bring to life one of the screen’s most lovable and down-to-earth characters. Marty Piletti is an everyman, humble and not traditionally handsome. Yet he has a huge heart and longs for love. While he initially has to be nudged by those around him, Marty decides to step outside of his comfort zone once he meets Clara. Listening to Marty’s courtship conversations with Claire transported me back to my own youthful romantic pursuits. When Marty takes Clara home and she agrees to second date, I found myself cheering as he triumphantly dances across the street. Borgnine was every bit deserving of his Academy Award for the role of a humble man with a heart of gold.

Beyond Borgnine, *Marty* features another heartfelt performance by Betsy Blair who makes a very convincing female counterpart. The film’s other characters, including the strong-willed Mrs. Piletti and Marty’s friend Angie also give very good support to this uplifting story. Indeed, rarely has there been a portrayal of the “cloud nine” experience so beautifully captured as in the film *Marty*.

**The Wild Bunch 1969, ★★★★★** After narrowly escaping a bloody, bungled robbery, “Pike Bishop” (William Holden) and the surviving members of his gang (Ernest Borgnine, Warren

Oates, Jamie Sanchez and Ben Johnson) regroup across the Mexican border. With the “Wild West” slowly disappearing around them, The Bunch is desperate for a one last score. Opportunity comes when corrupt “General Mapache” (Emilio Fernandez) hires them to obtain a lethal arsenal of cutting-edge weaponry. But Bishop’s former partner “Deke Thornton” (Robert Ryan) and a posse of bounty hunters are on their trail. Does The Bunch still have what it takes?

“Rebel *With A Cause*” is a perfect label for the late Sam Peckinpah. One way or another, he could always be counted on to defy convention (or the studio system); *The Wild Bunch*, one of his greatest achievements is no exception. The movie succeeds on practically every level; the characters are complex, the screenplay is thematically rich, and the action sequences are riveting and suspenseful. Additionally, Peckinpah made use of several contemporary, cutting edge techniques. These included slow motion, rapid editing – and far more blood squibs than any western had utilized at that point.

Unlike the handsome, clean-cut gunfighters that audiences had come to expect, The Bunch are flawed and past their prime. They are consistently struggling to keep up with the evolving world around them. The gang also face conflicts with loyalty and trust, both amongst themselves and those around them. William Holden is terrific as the aging Pike, and every other member of the Bunch is well written and cast. For his part, Ernest Borgnine succeeds at portraying Pike’s equally jaded second-in-command, “Dutch”. The two have been through a lot together, and while it’s clear that Dutch maintains loyalty to Pike and values their friendship, it is also understood that he’s unafraid to confront his leader. Warren Oates and Ben Johnson are both wonderfully goofy as the crude “Gorch Brothers”. This film is so well done that, in spite of the violence that follows the men of The Wild Bunch, I found myself rooting for them to the bloody end.

**From Here To Eternity 1953, ★★★★★** “Private Robert E. Lee Prewitt” (Montgomery Clift) has just arrived at The Scofield Barracks on the Hawaiian island of Oahu in 1941. Carrying a legendary boxing reputation, Prewitt is urged by “Captain Holmes” (Philip Ober) to join the regimental boxing outfit. When he refuses, Holmes (as well as most of the men on the base) sets out to make Prewitt’s military life a living hell, and only “Private Maggio” (Frank Sinatra) shows any sympathy. Meanwhile “First Sergeant Milton Warden” (Burt Lancaster) begins an affair with “Karen” (Deborah Kerr), the estranged wife of Holmes. Trials and tribulations ensue for these troubled soldiers and the people in their lives.

Acclaimed upon its release, *From Here To Eternity* received 8 Academy Awards and has remained in iconic status, with the infamous, wave-crashing love scene being parodied more than a few times. While the film is set in pre-war Oahu, its main concern is delving into the lives of its well-written characters. Montgomery Clift (nominated for an Oscar) has us feeling the agony of Prewitt’s attempt to distance himself from boxing, making it all the more heartbreaking when he finally reveals his reason. Equally touching is the short-lived but passionate affair that Warden and Karen share, making me wonder why neither Lancaster nor Kerr won for their Academy Award nominations. Here too, Frank Sinatra gives what is possibly the best performance of his career as the self-destructive Pvt. Maggio. It certainly helps that Sinatra has a memorable villain to deal with – a pre-*Marty* Ernest Borgnine, whose potential is very evident here. As the villainous “Sergeant ‘Fatso’ Judson”, Borgnine succeeds in creating a loathsome, slimy bully. If there’s one thing I’m hard pressed to find in this film, it’s a bad performance!

**The Dirty Dozen 1967, ★★★★★☆** World War II has been raging for years, but the Normandy invasion is fast approaching. Hoping to further weaken the German military, the OSS has devised a supplementary mission: an assault on a private chateau in France, full of high-ranking German officials and their mistresses. “Major John Reisman” (Lee Marvin) is assigned the task of training twelve pre-selected soldiers for the operation/suicide mission. There’s just one catch;

these “soldiers” are actually incarcerated criminals, each serving a lengthy prison sentence or awaiting execution. In exchange for completing - or rather, surviving – the mission their sentences with either be reduced or commuted. Reisman (who has his own disciplinary issues) has no choice but to accept the assignment, and manages the difficult task of getting 12 sociopathic men to trust him and accept him as their leader.

Robert Aldrich’s war thriller has a good dose of humor, suspense, action and even drama. Of course, none of this would have worked as well without such a damn good ensemble. Particularly noteworthy are the scene-stealing performances of John Cassavetes as the insubordinate former gangster “Franco”, and Telly Savalas as the unstable religious zealot “Maggot”. Though he occupies little screen time, Ernest Borgnine is perfect as the thickheaded military bureaucrat “General Worden”. Worden is skeptical of Reisman and the Dozen at first, nearly calling the operation off at one point. During war game exercises, the dozen takes the headquarters of the arrogant “Colonel Breed” (Robert Ryan) hostage. Though the group cheats in several ways to pull this off, it proves their capabilities as a unit. The moment Worden catches on to their ploy the look on his face is priceless.

End result? The Dirty Dozen has been hailed far and wide as a “classic”. Hell, even Tarantino tipped his hat to the film in *Inglorious Basterds*. And, now, I am putting this film in my list of favorites, too.

**Escape From New York 1981, ★★★★★** In the dystopian “future” of 1997, the most dangerous prisoners in the United States are sentenced to that most dangerous of prisons: the Island of Manhattan. Enclosed by a 50-foot wall and sealed off since 1988, the maximum security “prison” is heavily mined and monitored remotely by a militaristic police force. The Big Apple has become a place from whence there is no escape. This is truly unfortunate for the “US President” (Donald Pleasance), who survives a highjacking and subsequent crash of Air Force One, only to find himself held hostage by the prisoners. “Police Commissioner Hawk” (Lee Van Cleef) offers a deal to the prison’s newest arrival: soldier-turned-bank-robber “Snake Plissken” (Kurt Russell). Plissken will receive a full pardon if he can rescue the president within 24 hours. Once inside New York, Plissken must join forces with a small, but resourceful group of inmates – Ernest Borgnine, Harry Dean Stanton, Adrienne Barbeau – in order to survive and save the president from the savage “Duke Of New York” (Isaac Hayes).

In the years following *Halloween*, John Carpenter was on fire; *Escape From New York* sees him in the midst of his creative peak. Carpenter & Company take a reasonably good premise and have a lot of fun with it. Much like James Cameron would do with the first *Terminator*, Carpenter gets incredible mileage out of a small budget. In addition to some convincing miniature and matte painting work, Carpenter provides his own pulsing, synth-based score, which further adds to this nightmarish future.

While the above may have been enough to guarantee an entertaining flick, the deal is sealed with another first-rate cast. Kurt Russell proves excellent as the cynical anti-hero, Plissken – often coming across as a youthful Clint Eastwood. As for Borgnine, he instills a dose of jollity into the film as “Cabbie”. First introduced as he watches a satirical music number about dystopian New York, Cabbie is immediately established as a kooky, but likable ally. He also proves street smart, with a few surprises up his sleeve to help Snake complete his mission in the dark underbelly of New York. *Escape From New York* is arguably one of Carpenter’s best.

**The Poseidon Adventure 1972, ★★★★★** The New Year’s Eve celebration is in full swing aboard the aged, luxury-liner S.S. Poseidon. However, the party is cut short by a massive

tsunami, which causes the ship to capsize. The rebellious “Reverend Scott” (Gene Hackman), perhaps wishing to be more than a spiritual leader, urges the surviving passengers to move towards the now-above water hull rather than wait to be rescued. However, just a handful of people (played by Ernest Borgnine, Stella Stevens, Shelly Winters, Red Buttons, amongst others) are willing to take the risky journey. Is there hope for this small, but determined group in this dangerous maze?

To my generation, Roland Emmerich is undeniably the disaster flick king. But in the 70’s, that title belonged to producer Irwin Allen. And, before this genre wore out its welcome by the end of the decade, there were some legitimately decent entries. *The Poseidon Adventure* may be Allen’s best effort, giving viewers a consistently suspenseful couple of hours of as our heroes stumble through some very convincing set pieces. However, it is the actors that take *The Poseidon Adventure* a notch above the others of this ilk. Two of the film’s best performances belong to Gene Hackman and Borgnine, who create a believable antagonistic tension. Hackman’s Reverend Scott is unorthodox and controversial. He believes in taking chances, knowing there’s no guarantee of success. However, he knows in his heart the survivors will soon die if they do nothing. Borgnine’s bullheaded Lt. Mike Rogo on the other hand is content to do everything by the book, and this inevitably leads him to frequent clashes with Rev. Scott. Borgnine especially shines through in an emotional scene towards the end, scapegoating Scott for every hardship the group has endured. Shelly Winters also gives a noteworthy (and Oscar-nominated) performance as the heroic “Mrs. Rosen”. To that end, the eponymous ship may still sink – but the film does not.

#### **Silly me – I had high hopes for the following film:**

**Convoy 1978, ★★☆☆☆** Try to follow me here: Cruising through the Arizona Desert, truckers “Martin ‘Rubber Duck’ Penwald”(Kris Kristofferson), “Pig Pen”(Burt Young), and “Spider Mike”(Franklyn Ajaye) hear over their C.B.’s that it’s safe to increase their speed. Unfortunately, they’ve just been fooled by Rubber Duck’s corrupt old nemesis “Sheriff Wallace” (Ernest Borgnine). Wallace proceeds to “cite” the trio, who pay up and head on to their favorite travel plaza, Rafael’s Glide-In, with Wallace not far behind. At the Glide-In, Rubber Duck meets beautiful photographer “Melissa”(Ali MacGraw), whom he had been flirting with previously on the road. Wallace shows up and attempts to extort more money from Pig Pen and Spider Mike. A fight then erupts between the plaza’s many truckers and cops. After disabling the police cars, the truckers take off for state lines. Before long, other CB truckers join in, forming a massive convoy, with a furious Wallace in pursuit. Soon after, the convoy has both media and political attention.

I was actually eager to view another Peckinpah/Borgnine collaboration. In the end though, experiencing *Convoy* inspired me to do one thing repeatedly; yawn. Based on a hit country song, *Convoy* arrived in the middle of America’s CB trucking craze of the seventies. For once it seems Peckinpah is following a trend instead of creating one, and the resulting film is formulaic, silly – and at times, downright awful. For Borgnine and Kristofferson, all one would need to do is substitute in Jackie Gleason and Burt Reynolds, and you’d have a heavily diluted version of Hal Needham’s *Smokey and The Bandit*. Borgnine’s antagonist Sheriff just feels like a bully with no purpose. Not even Ali MacGraw as the “love interest” serves the slightest bit of purpose. Unmemorable characters + sub-par action sequences = *boring*. While none of this can be pegged on Borgnine or any of the other actors, they should have steered clear of this forgettable cash-in.

Take a look beyond Quinton McHale, and you'll discover one of Hollywood's most versatile actors. There aren't many in the industry who manage to stay as busy for as long as the talented Ernest Borgnine.

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A graduate of Columbia College film school, JARROD EMERSON has been working with Films42.com since 2007. With interests ranging from screenwriting to improv, he is grateful to Jan and Rich for their support, and for giving him a reason/excuse to watch even more movies! The bottom line is: there can never be too much cinema in Jarrod's life!