



Photo courtesy of Sir Knight Ken Jones.

Sir Knight Ernest Borgnine

Oscar Winning Actor and Advocate for Freemasonry ©
by Sir Knight Ivan M. Tribe

Between Warner Baxter in 1929 and John Wayne in 1970, a total of five Masons have won the Academy Award for best actor in a motion picture. By far the most active Brother in this hallowed group is the 1955 winner, Ernest Borgnine. While not holding lodge office per se, he has served in a variety of roles as a spokesperson for Masonic charities and also been a tireless advocate for the fraternity. In his screen career, Brother Ernie is neither the legendary figure nor the matinee idol such as Brother Clark Gable, but he has established a solid celluloid persona for some six decades, a rare feat in his own unique manner.

Born in Hamden, Connecticut on January 24, 1917 to Italian immigrant parents, Ermes Effron Borgnino (later Anglicized to Ernest Borgnine) had a fairly normal childhood with one exception. At the age of two, his mother took him and returned to Italy, coming back to the United States in 1924. In his boyhood, the youth joined the Boy Scouts and had a part in a high school play. Not long after completing high school in New Haven, Ernest enlisted in the United States Navy. Discharged in mid-1941, he returned to the navy after Pearl Harbor and ultimately spent a total of ten years in military service as a gunner's mate and chief petty officer.

Out of the navy, Borgnine's mother suggested that he take up acting on the basis of his "strong personality." Under the G. I. Bill, he enrolled at the Randall School of Dramatic Art in Hartford for six months. Borgnine opted not to go to Yale since they had so many degree requirements far removed from theater. Instead he sought practical experience and went to Abingdon, Virginia, and its somewhat renowned Barter Theater where for the next five years he did everything from driving a truck and painting scenery to walk-on parts and eventually lead roles. Certainly his best experience for Barter was as a cast member of Shakespeare's Hamlet touring Denmark and Germany, mostly on military bases. He also had parts in such productions as State of the Union and the Tennessee Williams play The Glass Menagerie.

During his years in Virginia, Ernest Borgnine also became a Mason. Initial interest came from his father who had been a Scottish Rite member. Next came his affection for Abingdon and its friendly people and atmosphere, recalling that "I grew to love the town and all it offered." One day he went to the print shop to pick up some show posters where the owner, Elmo Vaughn, was a Mason. Ernest told him that his father was a Mason and asked him about joining. Vaughn smiled but said nothing. Later, after asking a third time he received a petition. He says "I didn't learn 'til later that in those days you had to ask three times." Borgnine took his Entered Apprentice degree on July 7, 1948. Several months later on April 25, 1949, he was passed to the degree of Fellowcraft and after another week raised a Master Mason on May 2, 1949. Even after moving on to Broadway and Hollywood, Brother Borgnine kept his membership in Abingdon Lodge No. 48.

Before permanently settling in California, Ernest Borgnine made a few appearances in Broadway theater productions. His first role came as a male nurse in Harvey. Other stage roles followed in Born Yesterday and Mrs. McThing, playing a gangster in the latter. This led the actor to frequently being typecast as a villain when he moved to California in 1951. After a couple of small bit parts, he landed a larger job in From Here to Eternity as the brutal army sergeant "Fatso" Judson who administers a fatal beating to Frank Sinatra. While landing him high marks for his acting, Borgnine also received death threats from those who took his film treatment of a legendary screen favorite seriously.

Although Brother Borgnine's stature as an actor was increasing, the film that really elevated him to star status came in 1955 with his Oscar winning title role in Marty, a tender love story in which lonely, but plain, people meet and fall in love. Marty also won the best picture award. Marty Pilette, a rather portly and homely but good-

hearted Bronx butcher, was portrayed to perfection by Brother Ernie who demonstrated tremendous versatility. Film critic Bosley Crowther wrote in the New York Times calling his work "a performance that burns into the mind." A more modest Borgnine gave much of the credit for the film's success to writer Paddy Chayefsky whom he described as a master of "kitchen sink realism." In the year following his Oscar winning film, Borgnine continued to handle such varying roles as an Amish farmer in *Violent Saturday*, a rancher in *Jubal* with Brother Glenn Ford, a fight promoter in *The Square Jungle*, and a harried husband in *The Catered Affair* with Bette Davis and Debbie Reynolds who played his wife and daughter respectively.

In the 1958 western, *The Badlanders*, Borgnine and Alan Ladd portrayed two ex-convicts who got revenge by robbing a crooked mine owner who had wrongfully gotten them sent to Yuma Prison. One of the film's female stars, Hispanic actress Katy Jurado, subsequently became Ernest's second wife (he had an earlier marriage to a Navy nurse). Key parts in military and action dramas became his forte as roles like that of Marty Pilletti did not often come along in Hollywood. As a result he continued in a wide variety of character parts in television as well as motion pictures. For instance, he guested on the initial episode of the long-running adult western *Wagon Train* in September 1957 as "Willy Moran," a former Union soldier struggling to recover from a battle with alcoholism.

Although widely known as an actor, Brother Borgnine probably gained his greatest fame as star of the TV hit comedy *McHale's Navy* from 1962 until 1966. As the "gruff but lovable" Lieutenant Commander Quinton McHale, Borgnine became a familiar figure in millions of American living rooms. Like most military sit-coms, *McHale's Navy* bore little resemblance to reality. As one critic argued, the United States would not have won World War II if McHale and his inept crew had been typical. Still audiences loved him, servicemen also took him to heart, and he became one of their favorites, no doubt wishing that his character had been their own commanding officer. Injured veterans fondly recall his many visits to military hospitals. For example, my predecessor as Commander of Athens Commandery No. 15, Ken Jones, treasures his memory of Borgnine's visit when he was in Bethesda Naval Hospital recovering from injuries sustained in Viet Nam.

During his *McHale's Navy* days-no longer traveling as much to exotic film locales in foreign lands-Brother Ernest Borgnine became more active in Masonic work. He completed his Scottish Rite degrees in the Valley of Los Angeles on March 14, 1964. On June 6 of the same year he became a Noble at Al Malaikah Shrine Temple. The next year on February 4, 1965, Borgnine became a dual member of Hollywood Lodge No. 355. However, his Masonic work was not yet finished.

More Scottish Rite honors came in later years. In 1979, Ernie received the K.C.C.H., the 33rd Degree in 1983, and the Grand Cross in 1991. He took his York Rite Degrees in July 1985 in Long Beach Chapter No. 84 Royal Arch Masons, Long Beach Council No. 26 Royal and Select Masters, and ultimately was knighted in Long Beach Commandery No. 40, Knights Templar on July 28, 1985. He is a life member of all of these bodies.

Not merely content with just being a "celebrity Mason," Brother Borgnine has become a public advocate for Masonic bodies. Typical of his comments is found in a 2007 article titled "Mouth to Ear" in *Masons of Texas*:

"As I've advanced in Masonry, I have found we are an elite group of people who believe in God, country, family, and neighbours [sic]. We work hard to help our fellowman, and through our charitable work such as support for the Childhood Language Disorders Centers, we have made it possible to help many children grow into good American citizens. We should always be proud of the order which we belong to [sic]. Where in all the world do you find so many great men and Brothers who have helped the whole wide world? But-we are hiding our light under a bushel basket."

In practicing what he preaches, Brother Ernie served as honorary chair of the Scottish Ritecare program. Between 1972 and 2002 he marched several times in a Shrine unit as the "Grand Clown" in the Great Circus Parade in Milwaukee. He was also honorary chairman of a program to support the Scottish Rite Childhood Language Center in Richmond, Virginia. In non-Masonic charity work on behalf of veterans he served in 1996 as chairman of the National Salute to Hospitalized Veterans and traveled throughout the country making numerous visits.

Although *McHale's Navy* lasted through four seasons (138 episodes) plus re-runs, Borgnine was hardly ready for retirement. He continued appearing with regularity in both lead and support roles in major films and prime-time television. Listing all of this activity would be exhausting and time consuming, so only a few of the highlights will be mentioned here. Motion pictures include *Pay or Die* (1960) in which he played the martyred New York Police Detective Joseph Petrosino who was among the first to investigate the Mafia; *Go Naked in the World* (1961) with Gina Lollobrigida; *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) with Lee Marvin and Charles Bronson; and three made for TV sequels - *The Legend of Lylah Claire* (1968) with Kim Novak, *The Wild Bunch* (1969) with William Holden, and *Hannie Caulder* (1971) with Raquel Welch.



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In made for television movies, the more memorable titles included a western *The Trackers* (1971) with Julie Adams and Sammy Davis, Jr.; *Legend in Granite* (1973) in which he portrayed football legend Vince Lombardi; and more recently the lead role in a holiday season family effort, *A Grandpa for Christmas* (2007). Guest spots in major dramas included one of the most memorable episodes of *Little House on the*

Prairie (1974) and the final two episodes of ER in 2009 which netted him an Emmy nomination. He did a voice part in the cartoon series All Dogs Go to Heaven and another in Sponge Bob Square-Pants. From 1984 to 1986, he had a second prime-time adventure series Airwolf (55 episodes) with Jan Michael Vincent and a lesser but regular role as "Manny the Doorman" in The Single Guy (23 episodes) from 1995 to 1997. Although seventy-eight when this series started it was reported that Sir Knight Ernie was the first to arrive on the set, the last to leave, and generally had the most fun.

On his ninetieth birthday in January 2007, Brother Borgnine was honored with a dinner in West Hollywood. Attendees included his wife, the former Tova Traesnaes; other family members; his buddy from the "McHale" era, Tim Conway; Bo Hopkins; Burt Young; two notable leading ladies from earlier days, Debbie Reynolds and Connie Stevens; and a number of others. Miss Stevens, fondly remembered as the star of the Hawaiian Eye TV series and such youth films as Parish and Susan Slade, recently interviewed at the 2011 film fair in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, had only positive comments about Borgnine whom she described as a "wonderful person."

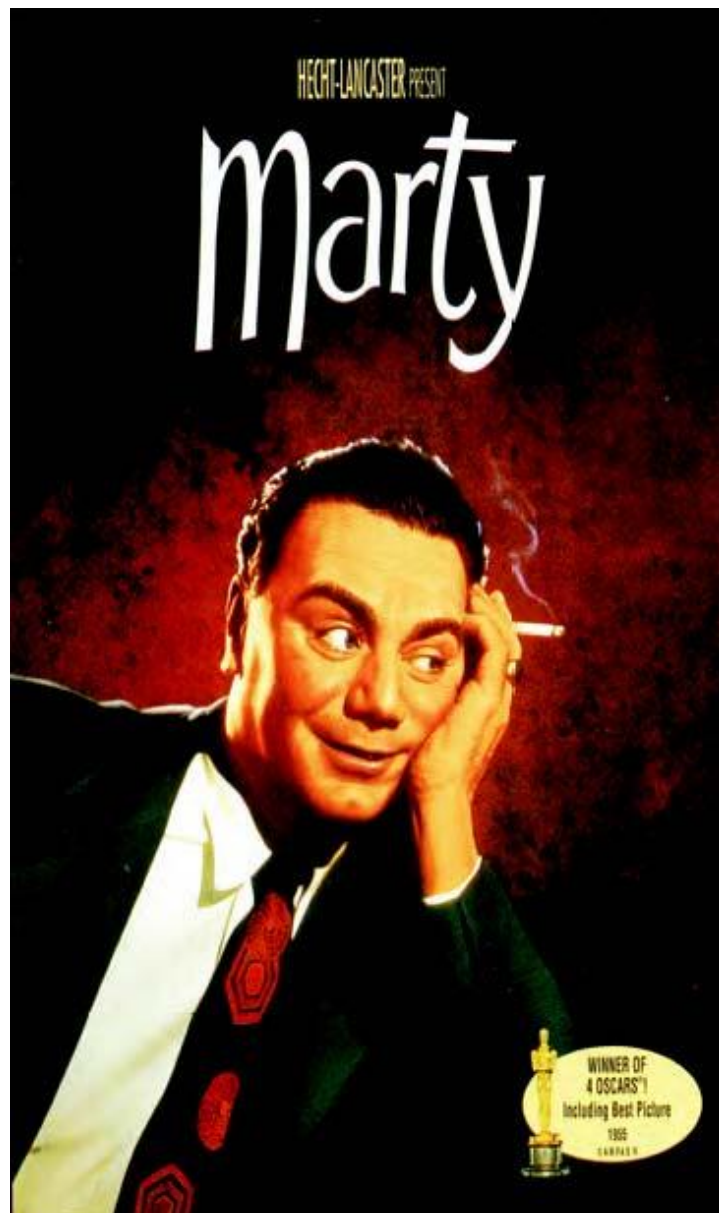
Still active at ninety-four and counting, Brother Ernie reminisced to a London reporter in May 2009 for The Scotsman with a touch of humor concerning his long film career:

"I've died on screen almost thirty times, I've been shot, stabbed, kicked, punched through barroom doors . . . pushed in front of moving subway trains, devoured by rats and a giant mutated fish, blown up in spaceships, melted down into a Technicolor puddle, jumped into a snake pit, and I perished from thirst in the Sahara Desert. I bounced around [in a] capsized ocean liner, beat Frank Sinatra to death, impaled Lee Marvin with a pitchfork, and had my way with Raquel Welch."

Honors have also continued to be accumulated by the senior actor. In January 2011, the Screen Actors Guild presented him with their Life Achievement Award. Some opposition arose from younger generation members who have found fault with his occasional politically incorrect comments, but it mattered not to Brother Borgnine who The Scottish Rite Journal pointed out was the only Mason besides the late Illustrious Brother Red Skelton to receive this recognition. On May 7, 2011, the Valley of Long Beach held a dinner in which they named their theater in the Scottish Rite Temple after the acclaimed actor with Illustrious Brother Norm Crosby presiding.

In reviewing and concluding this survey of the career of this noted Mason, it seems relevant to close with one of his own quotes: "I speak out loud about Masonry to everyone! I'm proud of the fact that I belong to an organization that made me a better American, Christian, husband, and neighbour [sic]; and all it took was a little self-determination by going foot-to-foot . . . and mouth to ear."

Note



Material for this article comes from the 1956 article on Ernest Borgnine in *Current Biography*, a variety of motion picture and Masonic websites including articles by Blake Bowden in *Masons of Texas* and in February 2011 *The Pennsylvania Freemason*. His book *Ernie: The Autobiography* (Citadel Press, 2008) is an honest survey of Borgnine's life and thoughts about his films, directors, and associates, but has only one passing reference to Masonry. I especially appreciate the assistance of the staffs at the Grand Lodges of Virginia and California, the Grand York Rite bodies of California, the Valley of Los Angeles, and Al Malaikah Shrine.

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