

## BOOKFILTER'S NOVEMBER BOOK OF THE MONTH

MICHAEL GILTZ | NOVEMBER 12, 2019

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**Every month, BookFilter picks the best new theater book, exclusively for Broadway Direct readers.**

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### ***The Contender: The Story of Marlon Brando***

By William J. Mann

\$35, Harper

Out now

The revolutionary actor doesn't even need two names. "Brando" says it all. And it's all been said about him already, hasn't it? So the first job of William J. Mann's latest effort was to make a case for why we need a new biography of Marlon Brando.

Mann handles this quickly. Brando's focus is what mattered to the actor the most — and by and large, it was the focus he used outside of acting. Brando's real passion was for political activism, for doing something that mattered, for making the world a better place, not just repeating lines on a stage or film set. With that in mind, Brando's odd, circuitous, and frustrating

career makes more sense.

Mann is the author of a number of well received Hollywood works of nonfiction, including biographies of Katherine Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, and Barbra Streisand, as well as the award-winning true-crime bestseller *Tinseltown: Murder, Morphine and Madness at the Dawn of Hollywood*.

And just as he's done before, Mann tackles well-worn territory and makes it fresh. The book is hefty but not exhausting. Unlike so many "definitive" biographies, you don't fear Mann will start to describe what Brando had for breakfast, where he bought his shoes, or other extraneous details that can overwhelm.

He tells the story of a full life but focuses in on key moments. And for fans of the theater, the first third is filled with great stories about Stella Adler, the creation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and the howl of despair in a soon forgotten play called *Truckline Café* (produced by Elia Kazan) that made the entire theater world sit up and take notice.

Best of all, Mann's focus helps us understand many puzzling details. Brando performed on stage with Paul Muni and later in life named Muni the best he'd ever seen. That struck me as odd, since Muni's film work is mostly stiff and noble. But Brando was acting with Muni in a piece of propaganda, a stage play called *A Flag Is Born* that argued that the Jewish people deserved — indeed, needed — a country of their own in the wake of the Holocaust. Muni was acting, but he was acting in something that mattered, something that could make a difference. And that made all the difference to Brando.

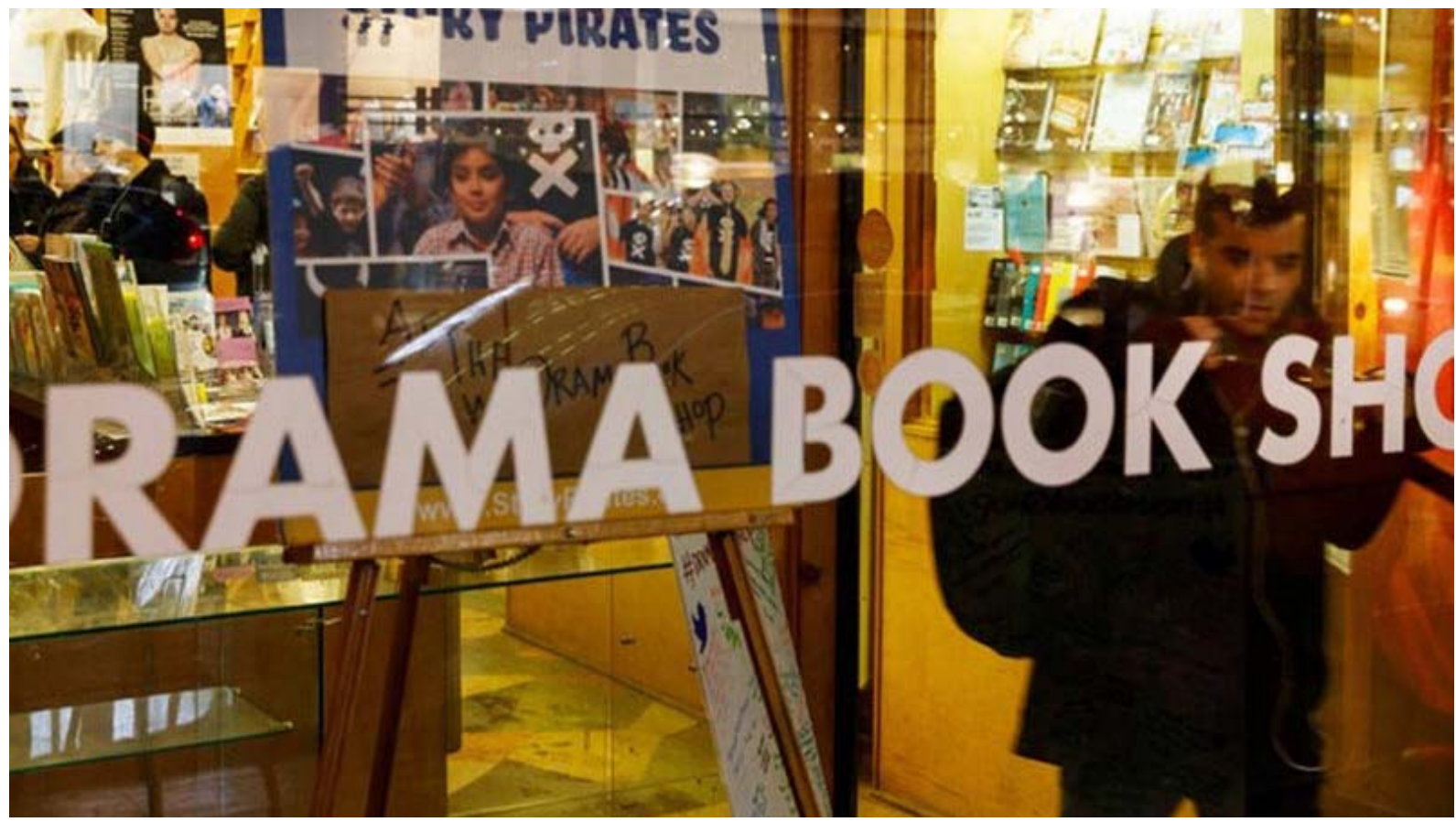
In Mann's work, we see Brando running away from his career to give talks across the country for that very same cause. At the time, he really had no career to walk away from and the audiences hearing him and others talk had no idea who he was, other than some kid who'd appeared on Broadway. When he was offered *Streetcar*, Brando hesitated. Not because he doubted his talent, but because he dreaded two years locked into a contract. Even more than that, he dreaded doing something as silly as acting. He was drawn — always — to activism.

Later in his life, when in the eyes of the world Brando was wasting his acting talents, he saw himself continuing to use his fame for things that mattered to him, like shining a spotlight on the injustices done to American Indians.

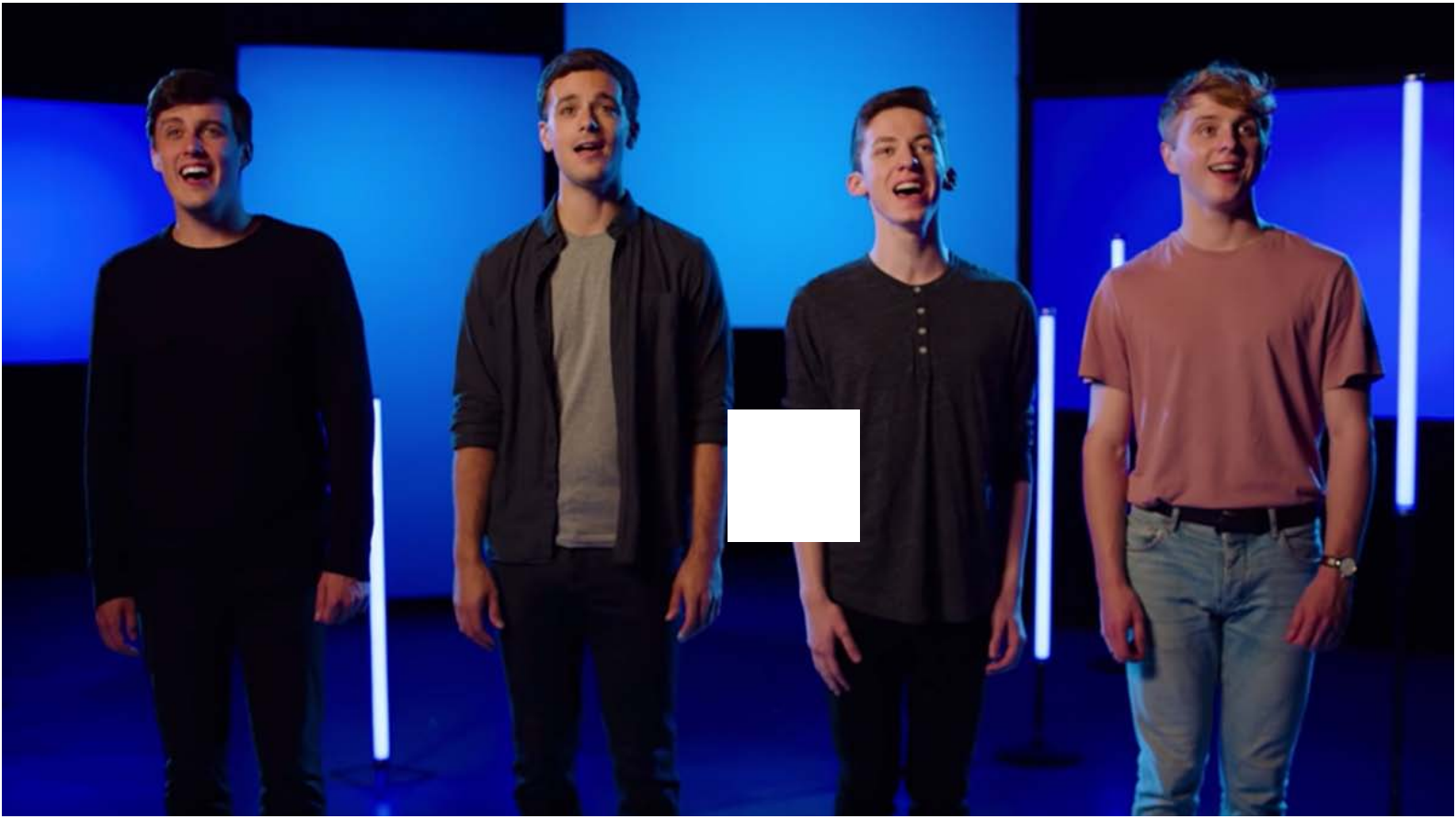
You still get the film and stage roles that set the world on fire and changed acting forever. But in Mann's telling, Brando's life involved a whole lot more than that. Frustrating, wasteful, brilliant,

giant in appetites and intellect and righteous anger, Brando has never made more sense.

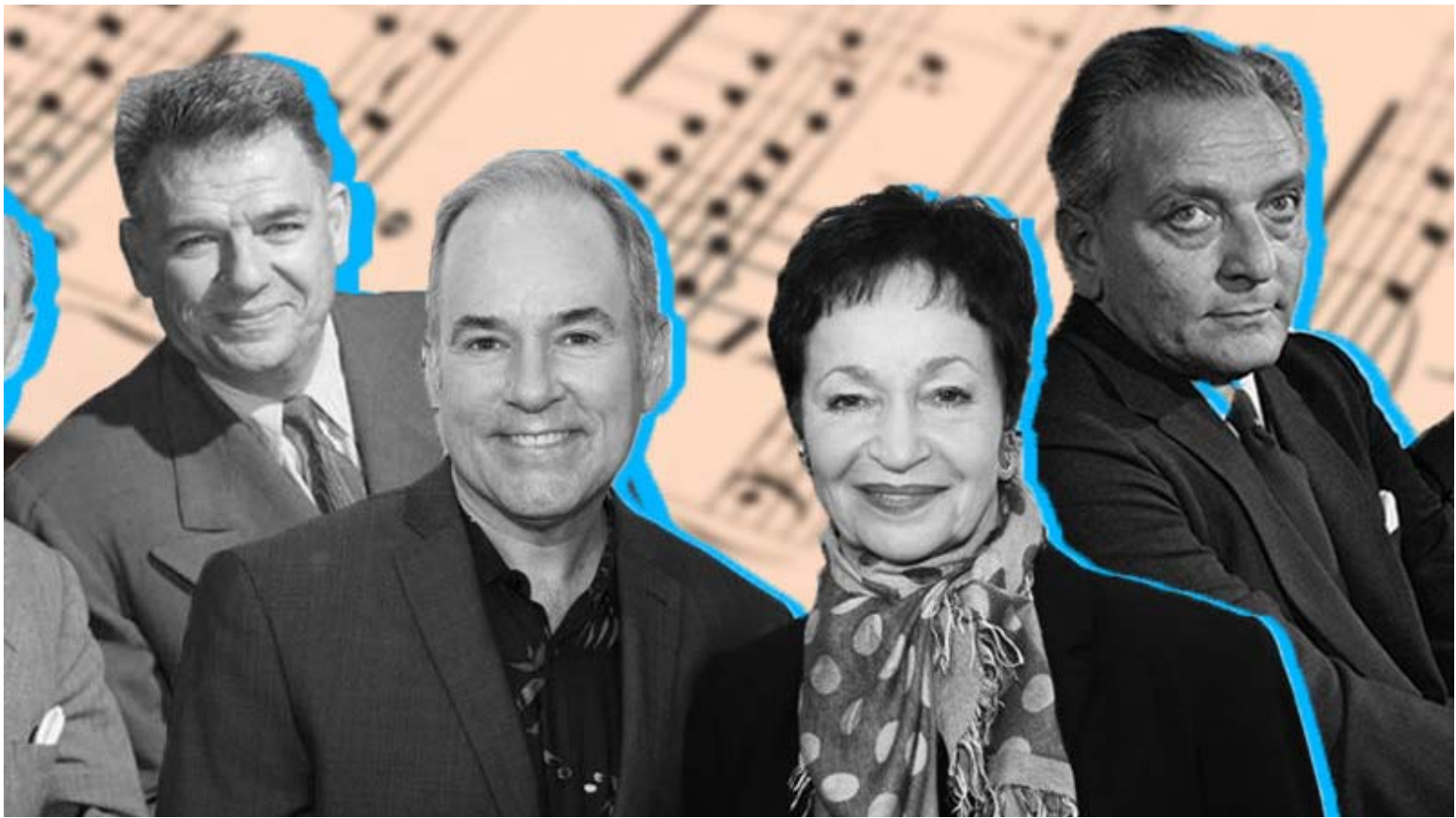
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