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★★★★★

[Reviews](#) March 31, 2014

Boardwalk

by [Nathan Rabin](#)

It's tough to understate the importance of Lee Strasberg to the evolution of acting as an art form. As the influential director of the Actors Studio in New York, co-founder of The Group Theater, and founder of the Lee Strasberg Theatre & Film Institute, Strasberg was one of the high priests of Method acting, a teacher and mentor whose students and protégés, from Marlon Brando to Robert De Niro, went on to revolutionize film and stage acting.

As a teacher and thinker, Strasberg's contributions to pop culture are immeasurable. As a film actor, however, his contributions are a lot easier to gauge. His IMDB page lists a mere 10 credits as an actor—and two of those were for different cuts of *The Godfather: Part II*, though his performance as Hyman Roth earned him both a Best Supporting Actor Oscar nomination and a “Most Promising Newcomer” nomination at the Golden Globes. (The latter incongruous honor pitted the then-seventysomething actor against the prepubescent Steven Warner, star of the ill-fated adaptation of *The Little Prince*, and the slightly less accomplished Sam Bottoms, who won the category for *The Dove*.)

By 1975, Strasberg had long since ascended to godlike status among his fellow actors and disciples; nominating him as a promising newcomer must have felt like a weird joke. A lifetime-achievement award would have made more sense than a nomination promising a giddy future. Yet after that, the elderly gentleman did make two more television movies and four more theatrically released films, including 1979's *Boardwalk*, which has just been released on a no-frills, feature-free Blu-ray from MVD Visual.

So while actors knew Strasberg as a sage and an idol, movie audiences knew him—if at all—as an unassuming-looking old Jewish man. The creaky, low-budget *Boardwalk* casts Strasberg as David Rosen, a consummate mensch and cafeteria proprietor who has been a staple of his community for decades, along with his loving wife Becky (Ruth Gordon). But the Coney Island neighborhood where the couple has lived and worked is rapidly devolving from an adorably run-down shadow of its former glory to a violent, gang-infested hellhole. The neighborhood is ruled by one gang in particular, a sassy theatrical unit known as The Satans.

The Satans are like the similarly named Satan's Helpers from *Pee-wee's Big Adventure*, or Hell's Satans from *The Simpsons*: a hilariously over-the-top parody of a street gang. Unfortunately, the Satans aren't meant to be a joke in *Boardwalk*, even if their predilection for pairing midriff-baring half-shirts with Daisy Dukes would better suit male prostitutes than menacing street toughs.

The Satans are the kind of gang that forever seems on the verge of breaking out into rapturous song and dance. And though they don't occupy a place of central importance to *Boardwalk*, they show up every 20 minutes or so, wild-eyed and crazy with malice, as a reminder of the ills of the modern world and the violent insouciance of the younger generation. They aren't onscreen enough to let *Boardwalk* realize its tremendous potential as a guilty pleasure in the *Death Wish III*

vein, which similarly pits an old man who just wants a nice nap against a hilariously hyperbolic burlesque of youths run wild. But The Satans are onscreen enough to destroy any chance *Boardwalk* might have to be a smart and soulful exploration of aging, identity, and heroism.

Boardwalk is ultimately two films operating at cross purposes. On one level, it suggests *Death Wish III* or *Gran Torino* played at one-quarter speed, as an old man is forced to defend his turf against comic-book ruffians; on the other, it's a sad, sentimental melodrama about an elderly couple trying to face the end and the complete transformation of their neighborhood with as much dignity as possible. *Boardwalk* doesn't have the energy or momentum to realize its potential for camp, or the gravity or depth to realize its aspirations to art. It's paced so slowly that its 98 minutes seem to linger for twice the length. The film is bogged down further by pointless subplots involving David and Becky's rock-'n'-roll-playing grandson, and his courtship of a beautiful shiksa, which contribute nothing to the film.

But the big problem with *Boardwalk* is Strasberg himself. The man synonymous with an explosive, soul-shredding, deeply internal and emotional form of acting delivers a flat, stilted performance as an unfailingly kind and compassionate man seemingly devoid of flaws, insecurities, or any inner life whatsoever. The character as written and performed is nothing more or less than the sum of his creaky dialogue and simplistic motivations. Those who can't do, teach, as the cliché goes: Lee Strasberg's enduring legacy is as an acting teacher, not as a film actor. The surprisingly dull *Boardwalk* helps illustrate why.

SPECIAL features

None.

GoWatchIt: Buy. Rent. Stream Boardwalk

★★★★★

PG

98 min / Run Time

March 25 2014 / Release Date

Home Video / format

Director:

- [Stephen Verona](#)

Writers:

- [Leigh Chapman](#)
- [Stephen Verona](#)

Cast:

- [Lee Strasberg](#)
- [Ruth Gordon](#)
- [Janet Leigh](#)

company:

- [MYD Visual](#)

BOARDWALK

All ratings

★

★★★★★ ★

★★★★★

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