

THE ADMIRABLE BURT LANCASTER
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The question is, which characters among actors and roles among movies do I admire the most? There are a good number of actors or roles that I have admired. Here is a list accompanied by the characteristics that I found to be admirable.

Charles Bronson: *Mr Majestyk*. On his own without fear.
Ben Kingsley: *Gandhi*, the calm, unyielding, incorruptible voice of humanity.
Charlton Heston: *The Ten Commandments* - Young Moses: Capable, incorruptible.
John Wayne: *The Quiet Man*. Standing up to and for the women he loves.
Anne Bancroft: *The Miracle Worker*. Indefatigable idealist. Beyond that I don't have the words.
Humphrey Bogart: *Casablanca*. Principled and courageous despite himself in difficult times.
Clark Gable: *It Happened One Night*: Standing up to and for the woman he loves.
Gone With the Wind: No one ever looked eye to eye at a woman like Clark. Courageous, gallant.
Errol Flynn: *Robin Hood*. Insouciant, panache with integrity.
Sidney Poitier: *Lilies of the Field*. A reluctant, joyful savior.
Henry Fonda: *12 Angry Men*. Cool in the face of hostility and opposition.
Gary Cooper: *They Came to Cordura*. The real exemplar of quiet courage.
Sean Connery: *Dr. No*. Athletic, handsome, passionate, cool under pressure, but human.
Paul Newman: *The Sting*. Shrewd, yet principled and light hearted.
Tom Hanks: *Larry Crowne*. Good hearted gentleman from sole to crown facing life fearlessly.
Toshiro Mifune: *Red Beard*. Principled, tough, understanding, humble.
Johnny Depp: *Don Juan de Marco*. Unadulterated lover, opens life to others.
Will Smith: *Hitch*. Rising from nerddom by technique and triumphing by sincerity.
Liam Neeson: *Schindler's List*. Audacious con-artist turned savior-humanitarian.
Geoffrey Rush: *The King's Speech*. Unwavering, self-taught teacher and friend.

The characters I admire the most usually play men who are not afraid either to fight, pursue their love, forge into the unknown, or stand by their principles. Women have been granted few such roles, much like Blacks for so many years. For far too long, women in film were stereotypical weak, fainting ladies. Then they abruptly transformed into absurd superheroines, with an occasional whore mixed in just to win an Academy Award. Admitting a strong male bias in my choices (I am happy being a man), the single exception I can think of among women's roles is Anne Bancroft in *The Miracle Worker*.

Who, for example could not admire Ben Kingsley's Gandhi, for his nonpartisan humanitarianism when he tells a distraught Hindu man who murdered a Muslim boy after his own son had been killed by Muslims.

“I know a way out of hell. Find a child. A child whose mother and father have been killed. A little boy about this high...and raise him as your own.... Only be sure that he is a Muslim...and that you raise him as one.”

What other champion of the downtrodden so thoroughly banished sectarianism? In this, Gandhi was unique. I cry every time I see that scene.

But I would neither want to be the abstemious Gandhi nor Ben Kingsley. For to me the ultimate test of admiration of an actor is to want to be that actor if I had to be born again as someone else. Among the world of actors it is Burt Lancaster, and no one else is even close. A physical masterpiece of nature with a mind to match, he was the exemplar of exuberance and, in the roles I love, integrity or at least sincerity.

Every person (except, of course, John Wayne) has many sides, and I love Burt Lancaster as the Athlete, the Fighter, the Salesman, the Enthusiast, the Lover, and yes, as the Idealist. But if I had to pick a single role, it would be as the *Birdman of Alcatraz*. He starts out as a murderer, a violent, bitter misanthrope, even a psychopath. The real Robert Stroud may have remained so, but not the character portrayed in the movie that I admire so. A chance encounter with a sick baby bird leads him to a rebirth. Through brilliance (which I admire) and by sheer force of will he becomes in turn a designer, a scientist, a philosopher, and ultimately a humanitarian - almost a saint without the self-sacrifice I abhor in saints.

The first sign of his humanizing is when he acknowledges the humanity of his genial guard. Later, after his birds have been taken away and he has been transferred to Alcatraz, he confronts one of the instigators of a prison riot who was shot and is sick of life.

The hopeless rioter asks Burt, "What's wrong with dying?"

Burt responds, "Cos life's too precious a gift, that's why. Because the first duty of life is to live."

Oh Burt. You're right on target as always.

In 1986, when Burt was older, I attended a film festival in his honor. He made an appearance. At the time he was suffering from arteriosclerosis. In response to a question, he was realistic and philosophical about his fate. He had to accept what had come his way, but for sure, he'd rather be young and vibrant again.

And for most of his life he was, and was the greatest salesman of enthusiasm. How much that I, a regretful but confirmed cynic, could have and still could use more of Burt Lancaster in my life!