A member of the legendary Group Theater, co-founder of the Actors Studio, director of four Pulitzer Prize-winning plays (including “A Streetcar Named Desire” and “Death of a Salesman”) and such classic films as “On the Waterfront” and “East of Eden,” Elia Kazan was as important (and as polarizing) a figure as anyone in show business in the 20th Century. His tempestuous life is amply documented in “The Selected Letters of Elia Kazan.”

“Its (sic) a more exact way to communicate — when I want to be exact,” Kazan said to producer Sam Spiegel of his letter writing. One suspects that his letters also were a badly needed creative outlet for a frustrated would-be author who was unable (at least for the majority of his career) to express himself except through interpreting the works of such playwrights and screenwriters as Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, William Inge and Budd Schulberg. Kazan spent most of his life trying to mask his inveterate anger and hostility. An unattractive immigrant, yearning in college for the nubile women who snubbed him (a rejection, however unintentional, for which he would overcompensate later in life through compulsive womanizing — which makes some of his letters to his first wife painful to read), he learned to subsume his anger and take on the appearance of the agreeable jack of all trades, always eager to please and able to repair anything around the theater that needed fixing. This is how Kazan acquired the nickname “Gadget,” a moniker he would come to despise.

He learned early to dissemble, flatter and do whatever was needed to get what he wanted from friends, lovers, co-workers and eventually actors (he got Andy Griffith drunk before a crucial scene in “A Face in the Crowd” to get the notoriously jovial actor in the correct hostile mood), and some of that ability to dissemble is on view in his letters. He could write studio head Jack Warner a fawning letter, saying that “I’ve never had a happier experience, or been treated better than during the weeks I made STREETCAR at Warner Bros. Studios,” then turn around and say to composer Alex North “I hate Warner Brothers. I hope they drop dead — even more than that I hope they go out of business.” Not long after that, he would work for Warner Bros. again, making “East of Eden.” (This is par for the course in Hollywood.)

Easily the most contentious act of Kazan’s life was his testimony in front of the House Committee on Un-American Activities regarding his involvement with the Communist Party while he was working with the Group Theater in the 1930s. Kazan named names, causing many in the film industry to look upon him with disapproval if not contempt for the rest of his life. “I believe what I did was necessary and right,” he wrote in 1952, and many people believe that his film “On the Waterfront” is, among other things, an apologia for informing.

But Kazan would eventually become uncertain about his testimony, admitting to a French interviewer years later that “I don’t think there is anything in my life towards which I have more ambivalence, because, obviously, there’s something disgusting about giving other people’s names.”

Kazan would pay a steep price for his testimony: losing out on the Oscar for the film version of “A Streetcar Named Desire” and, eventually, being blackballed from the American Film Institute’s Life Achievement Award, which his body of work as a filmmaker clearly warranted. And when the 89-year-old Kazan was finally awarded a special Academy Award in 1999, several audience members at the ceremony sat on their hands in protest.

Kazan was not a born writer or a particularly elegant prose stylist (as readers of his novels can attest), and these letters, while fitfully engaging to those who are already immersed in his life and times, may prove somewhat discouraging to the uninitiated. Nor are the notes, by editors Albert J. Devlin and Marlene J. Devlin, entirely free from error (it was Yale University Press, not Random House, that published Eugene O’Neill’s “Long Day’s Journey into Night”). But if read in tandem with “A Life,” Kazan’s superb autobiography, these letters provide an intimate glimpse into one of the most protean talents in the history of American theater and film — and, more important, they might inspire you to watch his films, especially underappreciated classics such as “Wild River” and “America, America.” They are worth rediscovering.

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