

## ***Rebel Without a Cause***

By Jay Carr

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When Nicholas Ray gathered the stars of “Rebel Without a Cause” around him in 1954, he thought he was make a black-and-white juvenile delinquent-themed B movie. Columbia had “The Wild One.” MGM had “The Blackboard Jungle.” Warner Bros had owned the rights to Dr. Robert M. Lindner’s “Rebel Without a Cause” since 1946, tested Marlon Brando in 1947, then tabled it when they couldn’t sign him. It was revived for a young actor named James Dean. More than revived. During the shoot, when “East of Eden” was released and Dean became an overnight star, studio head Jack Warner ordered the black-and-white filming to cease and told Ray to start all over again, using color. Dean exchanged his black leather jacket for a red nylon windbreaker and never looked back as “Rebel Without a Cause” was promoted to the A-list. What nobody foresaw was that this modestly begun film would define a new genre, tap the zeitgeist, and be instrumental in opening the floodgates of the 1960s.

“Rebel Without a Cause” opened on October 3, 1955. Dean died four days before. On September 30, he was driving his Porsche Spyder to a race in Salinas, California (site of “East of Eden”), when it collided with a Ford sedan. Dean, 24, died in his seat of a broken neck. His costars, Natalie Wood and Sal Mineo, would also die young. She drowned, he was stabbed. Over the years this has added to the film’s mystique. But it was Dean around whom the film revolves and who launched a new American film archetype – the sensitive teenager as betrayed outsider, struggling to live with integrity in a world that surrounded him with adult delinquency.

Brando was the wild one. Dean was the introspective, poetic one. His Jim Stark is anything but a rebel. In a world of momism and crumbling facades of adult authority figures, he longs for old-fashioned honor, writes with shame and disgust at the sight of his emasculated father, Jim Backus, wearing a frilly apron over his business suit. His sensitivity to the emotional values to which his parents have dulled themselves and his wistful attempt to impose order on the skewed adult world give him enduring appeal. He’s not wild, he’s aching because he can’t see how to make his life honorable, even when he risks it to save Sal Mineo’s doomed young disciple and not so latently homosexual adorer, Plato.



*Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo and James Dean in a climactic scene from “Rebel”*

The film, which spans 24 hours in the life of 17-year-old Jim Stark on his first day at a new school, reaches its first climax in a switchblade fight at the Griffith Park Observatory (although wearing a chest protector, Dean got nicked behind the ear and bled). It ends at the Griffith Park planetarium at night, when Mineo’s spooked Plato is shot down by police who think he’s armed and dangerous as Dean’s Jim Stark stands by helplessly, unable to make the police see that he had emptied the bullets from the pistol that Plato had previously handed him in friendship.

Unlike most so-called juvenile delinquency films, “Rebel Without a Cause” spends almost no time in high school. Its framing planetarium scenes seem intended to impart a cosmic dimension to the film. Certain there’s ironic intent in the high schoolers early on being forced to sit through an astronomer’s lecture on the order of the universe. What transpires on the planetarium steps at the end speaks of a fundamental disorder of the universe. It was no accident that a trenchcoated planetarium staffer entering the scene as everybody else is leaving is Ray, putting his seal on the moral chaos that makes a mockery of any idea of an ordered universe. Although “Rebel Without a Cause” takes its name from Lindner’s serious book about a psychiatric case study, it took nothing else from Lindner. To a postwar America shook up by the fact that things didn’t return to a com-

placent acceptance of traditional societal roles, jolted instead by an attack on the very legitimacy of adult authority, "Rebel Without a Cause" was rightly perceived as a threat to an already shaky structure. Father didn't know best. Faster wasn't even up to behaving as a father, protecting his son and leading him into adulthood. The message Jim Stark was receiving up from the hypocritical. Anaesthetized adult world was that Jim and those like him were on their own. "Rebel Without a Cause" is an indictment of adult abdication. The film's only adult capable of showing understanding (a juvenile copy also significantly named Ray) isn't there when Jim needs him and goes looking for him in the precinct house.

The film's tacked-on optimistic ending is just that – tacked on, lacking the vigor and conviction of what precedes it. The film's real message is that the instincts of alienated teens are right, and that if they are to live lives worth living, they must break away from the adult world trying to steamroll, desensitize, and compromise them and create their own world. That's the message of the famous scene when Jim, Plato and Natalie Wood's Judy play house late at night in a deserted mansion (actually a former Getty mansion, also used for "Sunset Boulevard"). Jim and Judy are the surrogate parents, Plato (ironic embodiment of the Greek philosopher's dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living) their child, although the homoerotic subtext is unmistakable. When Jim and Judy drift off by themselves, leaving Plato at the mercy of gang members hunting them down, Plato relives the abandonment scenario played out by his own father in the film and reacts with terror, fear, and self-destructive rage.

Although everyone in the film apart from Jim is a satellite character. Wood's Judy is the least satisfactory. Initial references to her promiscuity, arising from her conflicted relationship with her own emotionally closed-off father, were toned down, although her unstable nature is indicated by the ease and rapidity with which she switches allegiance from the gang leader (Corey Allen's Buzz, who dies in the chicken race with Jim in stolen cars) to Jim, as if any alpha male will do. Their love-fantasy scene, while surprisingly delicate and even charming, lacks emotional poignance because of the shallowness in the writing of her character. The gang members, on the other hand, are comic-strip caricatures with comic-strip names: Buzz (Allen), Goon (Dennis Hopper), Moose (Jack Simmons), and Crunch (Frank Mazzaola). Mazzaola, a real gang member, contributed to the research, right down to making everybody connected with the shoot realize that so-called juvenile delinquen-

cy wasn't simply the wrong-side-of-the-tracks phenomenon that pop culture had put forth ever since Sidney Kingsley's landmark play *Dead End* – that it involved middle-class kids whose families had their own cars in their own garages, a fact that made the delinquency even more frightening.

Dean's generation – and succeeding ones – identified with Jim's alienated chase after honor. "Rebel Without a Cause" launched not only the James Dean phenomenon, but the reputation of Ray as an unruly individualist who nevertheless pioneered on a communal approach with his young cast in order to nail actual teen feelings on film. His often rawly executed work was regarded as proof of his integrity. Just as Dean came to "Rebel Without a Cause" from the acclaim he generated in "East of Eden," Ray came to the film off what perhaps was the wildest western ever made, *Johnny Guitar*, in which he flamboyantly let the psychosexual chips fall where they may. There was more than a touch of misogyny in Ray's view of postwar American life as stifling and confining. Only Douglas Sirk maintained a more consistent and sustained similar vision.

Ray realized that Dean was the motor and heart of "Rebel Without a Cause." He not only allowed but encouraged Dean to participate in script rewrites. He even let Dean direct (the scene where Jim confronts his eunuch father in pain and anger and agonized love) and improvise. Jim's opening scene, in which he's seen drunk, cradling a toy monkey, in an obvious reversion to an infantile state, was improvised. It's one end of the arc described by the film. At the end, following Jim's futile attempt to save Plato's life, Jim's father tells him: "You did everything a man could." Without help from his own father, or any of the other dysfunctional mentor and authority figures in his world, Jim has undergone a rite of passage, growing in one night from frightened child to authentic adult. *Rebel Without a Cause*, an allegory of growth and the painfulness of growth, transcends its own lurid excesses and now-dated topicality to stand as the kind of big pop myth that defines the Hollywood studio movie at its most potent.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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