

Rebel Without a Cause

US : 1955 : dir. Nicholas Ray : Warner Bros : 111 min
 prod: David Weisbart : scr: Stewart Stern : dir.ph.: Ernest Haller

James Dean; Natalie Wood; Sal Mineo; Jim Backus; Ann Doran; William Hopper; Corey Allen; Rochelle Hudson; Dennis Hopper; Edward Platt; Nick Adams

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“ The bad boy from a good family! ”

Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

“This portrait of youthful alienation spoke to a whole generation and remains wrenchingly powerful, despite some dated elements. The yearning for self-esteem, the barrier to communication with parents, the comfort found in friendships, all beautifully realised by director Ray, screenwriter Stewart Stern, and a fine cast (far too many of whom met early ends). This was Dean’s seminal performance and an equally impressive showcase for young Mineo. Shot in CinemaScope. **** ”

Speelfilm Encyclopedie review – identical to above

Halliwell's Film Guide review

“The adolescent son of a well-to-do family gets into trouble with other kids and the police. The first film to suggest that juvenile violence is not necessarily bred in the slums, this somewhat dreary melodrama also catapulted James Dean to stardom as the prototype fifties rebel. Academy Award nominations: Nicholas Ray (Best Original Story), Natalie Wood, Sal Mineo. ** ”

Halliwell's Filmgoer's Companion entry on Dean:

“Moody young American actor who after a brief build-up in small roles was acclaimed as the

image of the mid-fifties; his tragic death in a car crash caused an astonishing worldwide outburst of necrophilia. A biopic, "THE JAMES DEAN STORY", was patched together in 1957.”

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

“The trouble with Jim (James Dean) is that his parents (Ann Doran, Jim Backus) quarrel all the time; the trouble with Judy (Natalie Wood) is that dad (William Hopper) shows her no affection; and the trouble with Plato (Sal Mineo) is that his parents are divorced. The three of them moon, while the other kids of the neighbourhood go around in gangs; Jim is in conflict with them and with the cops – but gee, it isn’t his fault. This hysterical, hyped melodrama was not well-received but its obvious appeal to adolescent audiences made it influential; it looks no better with the years but Dean’s performance, if showing little sign of great talent, remains highly effective. * ”

[no listing in "The Critics' Film Guide", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television", "The Time Out Film Guide", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995", "Variety Movie Guide 1993", "Video Movie Guide 1993" or "The Virgin Film Guide"]

Radio Times review:

“Classic drama starring James Dean and Natalie Wood. Jim is a new kid in town with a lot to prove and parents who don’t understand him. ***** ”

“The theme of the teenager as an alienated victim of family and society has never been done better. James Dean gives a superb, career-moulding performance as a frustrated youth from a well-to-do family, who rebels against his weak father and shrewish mother with such

delinquent behaviour as boozing, knife-fighting and racing hot rods in hazardous games of "chicken". Natalie Wood and Sal Mineo also stand out in an excellent, youthful cast that’s wonderfully controlled by director Nicholas Ray, but it’s Dean who remains most memorable, and his heartfelt portrayal epitomised his tragically short career. ***** ”

Despite being one of the cinema’s seminal tracts and widely held in high esteem, a film of this kind might seem to have only marginal relevance to the archive, until one remembers that the central figures – Dean, Mineo, Wood – are clearly intended to be 15/16. It also has an understated but unmistakable gay subtext in the relationship between Dean and Mineo, something which was very daring for 1955, and sets it apart from the run of youth rebellion movies.

Mineo was 16, Wood (a former child actress) 17, but Dean, fully 24 years old, was obviously way too old to play the confused and bitter adolescent, the new kid at school, the boy yearning for a father figure. Many of the school toughs he tangles with from Buzz’s gang were likewise well past their sell-by date (Dennis Hopper was 20, for instance) which lends the proceedings a slightly phoney air, but that’s such a cardinal flaw in school-age films from any era or continent that we shouldn’t discount it’s relevance on those grounds.

It’s worth remembering too that the film, released under an “X” certificate, could not actually be seen at the time by audiences of the age range it speaks to, and since there’s only one very brief scene at school (where Dean is upbraided for walking on the school emblem – inexplicably planted in the centre of the steps leading to the main building) the film and its message were free to be adopted by older teenagers as their own. In the 1950s there was quite a gulf between the ages of 15 and 18, a gulf that from an adult perspective is easily overlooked.

Watching “**REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE**” for the first time nearly half a century on, it’s impossible to appreciate the impact it generated on release, an impact hugely enhanced by the recent death of its star in a head-on collision along a desert road. With macabre irony, Dean had just collaborated (tongue conspicuously in cheek) in a road safety film aimed at the teen audience – “*Drive safely now. The life you save could be mine!*”. Twenty-six years later, co-star Natalie Wood was to die in a drowning accident, while Sal Mineo was murdered in 1976. What would the actuarial guages make of that probability, one wonders.

See also “**BADKONAK-E SEFID**” and “**BASHU**” - both recent Iranian films, and subject index under **ARAB WORLD / MIDDLE EAST**.