

IT'S A CLASSIC

It's the 40th anniversary of a classic



HUGH GALLAGHER

James Dean. The name immediately conjures up the image of troubled adolescence. In a brief three movie career Dean left an inimitable mark. Many have come along to be the new James Dean and none have come close to portraying the special loneliness and awkwardness of that dangerous bridge between being a child and being an adult.

In recognition of the 40th anniversary of "Rebel Without a Cause," the Fox Theatre in Detroit is showing "Rebel" with another Dean classic, "Giant." The showings continue through Sunday.

The third film in Dean's career, and maybe the most totally successful, is Elia Kazan's "East of Eden."

But it is Nicholas Ray's "Rebel" that is most identified with Dean and what Dean meant to every generation of teenagers that came after it premiered in 1955. Today, the movie's easy psychology and direct preaching on parent-child relationships seems artificial. The atti-

tudes expressed about dominant women are sexist for modern sensibilities. The Freudian undertones elicit more laughs than serious consideration.

Still, "Rebel" has a powerful impact. The movie has a rhythm similar to the emerging rock 'n' roll music, though Ray didn't use the actual music (it would be Richard Brooks' "Blackboard Jungle" that would explode with the "Rock Around the Clock").

"Rebel" was about the middle class, about a growing uneasiness among young people that they couldn't articulate and that the easy psychology of Ray's adults doesn't explain either. What explanation there is, is in the performance of Dean.

The opening scene is one of the most heartbreaking, emotionally honest bits of screen acting you are ever likely to see. Dean wasn't alone in his use of Method Acting techniques. Montgomery Clift and Marlon Brando had already delivered strong, thoughtful performances. But Dean created a younger, softer, more vulnerable persona, even though in "Rebel" he is the strongest of the unhappy teenagers.

The opening shows Dean on a wooden bench at the local police station.

Dean died too young in a car accident. Had he lived, of course, he might have become overweight, overaffected, overpaid like Marlon Brando, outliving his best work by decades.

He's drunk, giggly, stupid and sad. He's every teenage boy you've ever picked up after he's been out on a toot and come home alternately playful and full of emotional pain. Dean and Ray immediately establish the young man's character and define his problems. It is a brilliant, searing opening that every young person understands as absolutely honest.

In the three-way relationship with Sal Mineo and Natalie Wood, Dean's young man is expected to take on the role of the strong father for which he himself has been searching. The other scene that everyone remembers in "Rebel" is Dean's confrontation with

the ineffectual father played by Jim Backus. Here Dean's face seems to crumble in a combination of rage and sorrow as he picks his apron-draped father from his knees.

But it isn't just pain that Dean expresses. There is also a playfulness that rounds out his character and a quiet strength underneath that saves the character from seeming whiney.

George Stevens' "Giant" is epic movie making. Dean plays support to Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor. He was nominated for an Oscar for this film, perhaps his least representative. But his performance as a rowdy, heavy drinking wildcatter is excellent and equally truthful.

Dean died too young in a car accident. Had he lived, of course, he might have become overweight, overaffected, overpaid like Marlon Brando, outliving his best work by decades.

Instead we have Dean forever young and forever the best interpreter of what it is to be young.

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