

# TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 9  
7 P.M. • HUMANITIES  
QUADRANGLE  
LECTURE HALL

## REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM  
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



In 1955, François Truffaut wrote, “In James Dean, today’s youth discovers itself.” They discovered (male) restlessness, moodiness, angst, sensitivity, and rebellion—making Dean an overnight phenomenon with his first starring role, in Elia Kazan’s *EAST OF EDEN*, released on March 9, 1955. *REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE* began production on March 30 as a black-and-white B-movie. But four days later, studio head Jack Warner, realizing Dean’s importance and determining that *REBEL* would be a major release, halted filming and started it over in color (giving us Jim Stark’s red jacket—an image for all time) and spectacular CinemaScope. Dean went on to the epic *GIANT*, and seemed destined for a big career, but on September 30 he died, at age 24, in a horrifying auto accident. The shock of Dean’s death helped make *REBEL*, which premiered less than a month later, on October 26, a big hit. But the film’s appeal stretched well beyond Dean’s tragic aura. As Jay Carr observed, *REBEL* “would define a new genre, tap the zeitgeist, and would be instrumental in opening the floodgates of the 1960s.”



Director Nicholas Ray, who wrote the original story, borrowed the title, and nothing else, from a 1944 case study of an incarcerated psychopath. Ray’s scope was larger, including three central characters, a love story, a gay subtext, and stylized melodrama. But, still desiring to portray juvenile delinquency with authenticity, he researched for eight months, interviewing police, judges, youth leaders, and teenage gangs, and enlisted three screenwriters. Delinquency was a hot topic in 1955: one of *REBEL*’s taglines was, “Teenage terror torn from today’s headlines.” MGM’s controversial *BLACKBOARD JUNGLE* had opened earlier that year, and the Broadway production of *WEST SIDE STORY* was in planning stages. Unlike those two works, which are about New York City ghetto gangs, *REBEL* is set in middle-class L.A. suburbia, where bored teenagers, disenchanted with the adult world, search for alternatives, from getting “kicks” with switchblades and fast cars, to creating their own family structures.

Dean’s rebel is a descendant of Marlon Brando’s motorcycle gang leader in *THE WILD ONE* (1953)—who, when asked what he’s rebelling against, replies “Whadda you got?”—and the ancestor of alienated protagonists without social agendas in films as disparate as *COOL HAND LUKE*, *THE GRADUATE*, *EASY RIDER*, *BADLANDS*, *SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER*, *THE OUTSIDERS*, *THE BREAKFAST CLUB*, and *BOYZ N THE HOOD*. Reflecting a time when social discontent was kept bubbling beneath the surface, *REBEL* both condemns middle-class conformity and upholds it: one of Jim’s complaints is that his apron-clad dad and overbearing mom do not fit conventional “father knows best” gender roles. Chris Fujiwara wrote, “Perhaps Ray’s intention was to espouse neither rebellion nor conformity, but to document the contradiction between the two in American society and their war for ascendancy within the individual.” In any case, in presenting dysfunctional families, adult hypocrisy, and the yet-to-be-named crisis of masculinity, *REBEL* undermined mid-1950s complacency.

Ray, whose career began with black-and-white noir (*THEY LIVE BY NIGHT*, *IN A LONELY PLACE*), became a master of color and widescreen. Ray: “When you first see Jimmy in his red jacket against his black Merc, it’s not just a pose. It’s a warning, it’s a sign.” Red, whether representing rebellion, passion, or violence, is a major signifier, announced with the opening credits’ lettering and then by Judy’s defiant appearance, in red coat and garish lipstick; the planetarium envisions Earth’s demise in a burst of red fire. Ray’s creative use of CinemaScope—the widescreen (2:35:1 width-to-height) process introduced in 1953 to lure television viewers back to the movies—is also evident immediately, with Jim, on the ground stretched out across the screen. In the police station, Ray frames Jim, Judy, and Plato together, implying their inevitable unity despite barriers between them. One of the most dramatic scenes has Jim centered between his parents on a staircase, with dominant mom, at the top, extreme left, and defeated dad at the bottom, extreme right. The only way fully to experience Ray’s numerous achievements with CinemaScope is on the big screen, and we are proud to present a brand-new 35mm print to celebrate the return of Treasures from the Yale Film Archive.

DIRECTED BY **NICHOLAS RAY**  
ORIGINAL STORY BY **NICHOLAS RAY**  
SCREENPLAY BY **STEWART STERN AND IRVING SHULMAN**  
CINEMATOGRAPHY BY **ERNEST HALLER**  
PRODUCED BY **WARNER BROS. (1955)**  
111 MINS.  
STARRING **JAMES DEAN, NATALIE WOOD, SAL MINEO, JIM BACKUS, ANN DORAN, COREY ALLEN, WILLIAM HOPPER, DENNIS HOPPER, EDWARD PLATT, AND MARIETTA GANTY**

**DID YOU KNOW:** THE ABANDONED HOUSE IN WHICH JIM, JUDY, AND PLATO HIDE HAD BEEN USED FOR NORMA DESMOND’S MANSION IN BILLY WILDER’S *SUNSET BOULEVARD* (1950); THIS TIME THE POOL WAS EMPTY. SHORTLY AFTER *REBEL* WAS RELEASED, THE MANSION WAS TORN DOWN.

**NEXT UP:** DIRECTOR MIRA NAIR’S VIBRANT CULTURE-CLASH ROMANCE, *MISSISSIPPI MASALA*, STARS SARITA CHOUDHURY, DENZEL WASHINGTON, ROSHAN SETH, AND CHARLES S. DUTTON, AND SCREENS IN AN ARCHIVAL 35MM PRINT NEXT **THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, AT 7PM.**