



MEMBER PICKS

Rebel without a Cause

Rebel without a Cause

Directed by/Original Story by: Nicholas Ray

Production Company: Warner Bros.

Produced by: David Weisbart

Dialogue Supervisor: Dennis Stock

Assistant Directors: Don Page, Robert Farfan

Screen Play by: Stewart Stern

Adaptation by: Irving Shulman

Director of Photography: Ernest Haller

Stills: Floyd McCarty *

Editor: William Ziegler

Art Director: Malcolm Bert

Set Decorator: William Wallace

Costumes Designed by: Moss Mabry

Make-up Supervisor: Gordon Bau

Music by: Leonard Rosenman

Sound by: Stanley Jones

Technical Adviser: Frank Mazzola *

Cast:

James Dean (*Jim Stark*)

Natalie Wood (*Judy*)

Sal Mineo (*Jon 'Plato' Crawford*)

Jim Backus (*Frank Stark*)

Ann Doran (*Mrs Stark*)

Corey Allen (*Buzz Connors*)

William Hopper (*Judy's father*)

Rochelle Hudson (*Judy's mother*)

Dennis Hopper (*goon*)

Edward Platt (*Ray, the social worker*)

Steffi Sidney (*Mil*)

Marietta Canty (*Plato's maid*)

Virginia Brissac (*Jim's grandmother*)

Beverly Long (*Helen*)

Ian Wolfe (*lecturer*)

Frank Mazzola (*Crunch*)

Robert Foulk (*Gene*)

Jack Simmons (*Cookie*)

Tom Bernard (*Harry*)

Nick Adams (*Moose*)

Jack Grinnage (*Chick*)

Clifford Morris (*Cliff*)

Dick Wessel (*observatory guide*) *

Jimmy Baird (*Beau*) *

Nelson Leigh (*sergeant*) *

Dorothy Abbott (*nurse*) *

Louise Lane (*woman officer*) *

House Peters (*officer*) *

Gus Schilling (*attendant*) *

Bruce Noonan (*monitor*) *

Almira Sessions (*old lady teacher*) *

Peter Miller (*handcuffed hoodlum in station*) *

Paul Bryar (*desk sergeant*) *

Paul Birch (*police chief*) *

Robert B. Williams (*Ed, Moose's father*) *

David McMahon (*Crunch's father*) *

John Close (*cop at station*) *

Nicholas Ray (*man in last shot*) *

USA 1955©

110 mins

Digital 4K

* Uncredited

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SIGHT AND SOUND

'It's a great coming-of-age melodrama with an incredible cast.'

– Luke Hemmings, BFI Member

'Whatever's inside making me what I am, it's like film. Film only works in the dark. Tear it all open and let in the light and you kill it' – James Dean

In October 1955, when Nicolas Ray's *Rebel without a Cause* premiered in New York to feverish queues of mourning teenagers, the film's moody fledgling star had been dead for a month. James Dean's death only heightened the power of the blazing, jerky anguish he displayed onscreen, lending tragic poignancy to his every movement. Dean was 24 and already buried back home in his midwestern farm town, with three motion pictures and a crumpled silver Porsche left in his wake.

Rebel without a Cause focuses on high schooler Jim Stark (Dean), who arrives in town with his parents after they have taken it upon themselves to move yet again, occasioned by their only son's delinquent behaviour. It's there he meets the beautiful Judy (Natalie Wood, only 16 during the film's production) and the lonely oddball Plato (Sal Mineo), but Stark finds himself increasingly alienated by his spineless parents, the overbearing local cop, and the gang of thugs who challenge him to the fatalistic game of chicken known as a 'chickie run'. Nicholas Ray – adored by cineastes for his portraits of mid-century American outsiderdom and boldly symbolic use of colour and delineation of space (he briefly apprenticed under legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright) started out with the idea to capture the interior lives of juvenile delinquents and the social causes for their actions. This Eisenhower-era fascination with – in fact, invention of – the 'teenager' is key to many films of the period (often made, as with Ray, by older people): *The Wild One* (1953), starring Dean's hero Marlon Brando; *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956) and *Jailhouse Rock* (1957), both stationing teen subculture in clothes, slang, and rock'n'roll.

But *Rebel without a Cause* is the fullest picture of a Californian mid-century culture that is stuffed with nice suburban homes, fussy apron-clad mothers, good education, caring authority figures. And yet there is a vein of dissatisfaction and psychological torment beneath this sunny exterior: sudden death by automobile, the great American love of the 1950s; animal cruelty (mentioned at the start of the film in a jarring manner); sublimated homosexuality. There's a real sense of the apocalyptic – not in the literal fifties duck-and-cover sense, but you only have to recall the presentation about the death of the universe in the planetarium to get a sense of the emotional stakes.

It's well worth remembering that no audiences ever saw *Rebel without a Cause* while James Dean was still alive. Then, as now, it's impossible not to read that tragedy onto the strange, cosmically sensitive, fatalistic beauty of this unsubtle movie. By today's standards, *Rebel without a Cause's* attempt to parse middle-class, garden-variety teen alienation may seem antiquated: it doesn't truly reject the generation prior in the way youth subculture would in the decades to come, and it finds its diagnosis squarely in a dime-store Freudian, masculine understanding of the nuclear family. Newcomers to the film expecting a timeless portrayal of modern cool might be taken back by *Rebel's* stagey extravagance. A castrating mother, emasculated father, and disturbed pal who shoots puppies all offer up a rather literal melodramatic dimension with heavy Freudian intent. And yet: it endures through a peculiar, mesmerising intensity, one that surpasses its weaknesses.

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Rebel is full of youthful, defiant proclamations. In the two leads' first real exchange, Natalie Wood's Judy sighs theatrically, 'Life is crashing in on me!' Dean's Jim responds in a sing-song tone: 'Life *can* be beautiful.' It's a half-serious platitude, just short of sarcasm, but Dean understands the puffed-up callowness of youth, and exhales the line perfectly. There's just enough sincerity there to carry it off.

A string of quasi-philosophical remarks like these punctuate the film, underlining the self-seriousness of teenage rebellion. Ray's visual patterns and stylised, dreamy dialogue all lend a peculiar resonance to the film: *Rebel* is a movie to be enjoyed for its feverish allegory and loose poetry, not for its literal depiction of teen rebellion or social issues. It's a film which uses the vernacular of youth not only in its dialogue but in its fevered, everything-is-the-end-of-the-world tone (haven't we all been this dramatic at 16?) The colour palette, too, is theatrical: there's a garish overabundance of the colour red. It's used as blatant psychological symbolism, signifying both danger and passion. Scarlet and vermilion shades appear everywhere, from the opening title credits to the contentious lipstick Judy wears, and that's before you get to the famous windbreaker. On the subject, Ray remarked, 'the use of primary colour in a film is as significant as the use of a close-up.'

In terms of pacing, the film also follows a curiously nervous rhythm, stuttering along with boldly hued intensity that feels reflected in Dean's own rather mannered, nervy performance. Jim pouts, slouches, flails, and screams, so convincingly a petulant teenager. Revisiting his performance now is to be freshly reminded of its histrionics – 'you're tearing me apart' undeniably among them – but nonetheless startled by its sustained power.

Audiences had already seen Dean in *East of Eden* (1955), the Steinbeck adaptation directed by Elia Kazan, in which he gave a performance of twisted, heartbreaking anxiety, and waited to see if their doomed romantic boy-hero would find resolution for his inner wells of torment. In *Rebel*, Dean finds redemptive love in a band of teen misfits he turns into a makeshift family, only to find the brief idyll shattered by the external world of adults: so perhaps the answer is no.

There are few films of the era that feel so simultaneously products of their specific era and like objects, as Todd Haynes once put it, flung out of space. *Rebel without a Cause* is a paradox: undeniably dated, and also gleaming with small moments which flicker in the brain long after the credits have rolled. There's Dean putting his cigarette in his mouth backward, and Judy fixing it for him; Jim and Plato whispering nihilistic words while gazing skyward in the Planetarium; and at the end of the film, when Jim tenderly zips up his dead friend's borrowed jacket in a final, loving gesture. When Dean finally fixes his parents with a gaze of both vulnerability and defiance, Judy cradled in the crook of his neck, he has transitioned from disaffected youth to shaky adulthood.

As Leonard Rosenman's unforgettably lush, jazzy score reaches a peak and the Griffith Observatory fades into the night, *Rebel without a Cause* feels as haunted by uncertainty as that empty swimming pool the teenagers take shelter in. There may be an unreachable gulf between our time and Jim Stark's – and between the living and the dead as we see them luminous again on the big screen. But the urge to be understood – and the painful dislocation felt so deeply by these lost kids – feels right within touching distance.

Christina Newland