

## REVIEWS

### *James Dean*

#### *Rebel with a Cause*

By Wes D. Gehring

(Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2005. Pp. xii, 303. Photographs, notes, select bibliography. \$19.95.)

### *Hoosiers in Hollywood*

By David L. Smith

(Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 2006. Pp. xix, 596. Photographs, bibliography, index. \$59.95.)

I'm not sure I can imagine modern masculinity without James Dean. Sure, Marlon Brando had angst. In his films of the first half of the 1950s, including *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), *Viva Zapata!* (1952), *The Wild One* (1953), and *On the Waterfront* (1954), Brando visibly suffered on screen, torn by psychological demons and tortured by moral choices. But he suffered in a manly, hairy-chested manner, a mixture of grunts, grimaces, and testosterone. Dean's suffering was somehow womanlier. He cried, whined, moaned, buried his face in his hands, collapsed into a fetal ball, and just fell apart. Brando's angst threatened others. At any moment it might explode into violence. Dean's threatened only himself. Brando's was existential; Dean's nihilistic. Dean's

emotional androgyny became one of the pillars of the counterculture and helped to define the sensitive New Age guy.

Two questions immediately arise for a biographer. What were the sources of Dean's on-screen presence? And how does one write a biography of a man who had become a fable even before the automobile crash that took his life? Three films transformed Dean into an American icon. In *East of Eden* (1955), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), and *Giant* (1956), Dean played variations of the same role: the lost, confused, suffering, ultimately hopeless man-child. His body was an exposed nerve, his psyche a basket case. Watching the films today, one is struck by how badly he overacts. His inability to make eye contact,

childish whining, and cloying emotionalism approach irritating mannerisms. (Which, of course, makes one wonder what it was that so attracted audiences.) But his films, including two released after his death, made Dean into an icon, freezing him in a particular role at a particular cultural moment.

In *James Dean: Rebel with a Cause*, Wes D. Gehring attempts to separate the actor and the person from the icon. In the process, he takes a stab at the central biographical questions. Unlike previous biographers, who either blurred the line between Dean and the roles he inhabited or played fast and loose with psychological theory, Gehring does not see the on-screen Dean as a mirror reflection of the off-screen Dean. Gehring's Dean is remarkably well-adjusted: nice, loving toward his aunt and uncle (Ortense and Marcus Winslow) who raised him in Fairmount, Indiana, respectful toward his leading ladies, humorous around his friends, and delightful in his ability to mimic others. He fits the old Hoosier ideal: "It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice." Yet Dean was also a serious Method actor, trained in the famed Actors Studio under the direction of Lee Strasberg and Elia Kazan. Method acting demanded total immersion in a role, and it trafficked in the antihero rather than traditional leading man. The Method antihero tended toward dumb inarticulateness and painful vulnerability rather than quick, deci-

sive actions. Dean absorbed the Method style, but in the end, Gehring insists, it was a pose, not who Dean was.

Gehring makes a good case for the psychologically healthy Dean, but at times he goes too far. His volume is part of the Indiana Historical Society's Indiana Biography series, and perhaps he credits Dean's years in Fairmount with too much influence on his personality and career. To be sure, Fairmount is a slice of mythical, rural Indiana, and Dean's time there was not the prison sentence that several other biographers have speculated. But Gehring stretches the point when he writes: "One cannot help thinking that the moxie Dean showed in leaving his Hoosier haven for college in California (the site of so many painful memories), and hopefully an acting career, was born of the non-stop support he had received in Fairmount. Long before Dean was famous, he was the proverbial big fish in a small town. And sometimes that makes all the difference" (p. 79). Perhaps, but it is just as likely that he left Fairmount to find something that was just not there.

Beyond this single quibble, Gehring's book is a model of craftsmanship. He has written numerous other biographies of actors and actresses, and he knows Hollywood and the motion picture industry. His discussion of Dean's three major films, as well as of Dean's relationships with directors and fellow actors, is consistently insightful.

For the most part, Gehring chooses not to delve too deeply into Dean's iconic place in American cultural history or the actor's importance at a particular historical moment. The question of how Dean altered the nature of modern masculinity or invented a new "type" that helped to reshape Hollywood is largely outside of the scope of the book. At no point does Gehring promise to deliver more than he does—a fresh, sympathetic treatment of Indiana's most famous actor.

Dean may be Indiana's most famous person with a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame, but he is not the only one. As David L. Smith shows in *Hoosiers in Hollywood*, the list includes such important and diverse figures as Anne Baxter, Scatman Crothers, Louise Dresser, Irene Dunne, Sid Grauman, Phil Harris, Howard Hawks, Will Hays, Kevin Kline, Carole Lombard, Karl Malden, Steve McQueen, Dick Powell, Red Skelton, Robert Wise, and many more. The inevitable questions are: What are we to make of all this? How does Indiana stack up against other states in the star-producing business? I don't know. Is there something in the Indiana soil that lends itself to

producing corn, soybeans, and Hollywood talent? I don't know. In his brief introduction, Smith suggests a logical reason why Indiana has been a pipeline to Hollywood: Its central location made it a transportation hub. Traveling talent shows regularly stopped in Indiana on the way east and west, exposing Hoosiers to their creativity. And creativity seen became creativity imagined.

*Hoosiers in Hollywood*, however, is not a sociological study that probes deeply into the "why" of the subject. It is instead a big, beautifully produced, nicely illustrated coffee-table book containing mountains of biographies and facts about the Indiana-Hollywood connection. It's a fun book to pick at, making it easy to discover the stars from different towns, cities, and counties. My most common response was: "I didn't know he or she was from Indiana." In other words, the book does exactly what it was meant to do.

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