



Dean, James (1931-1955)

by Jim Provenzano

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Although he spent only two years in Hollywood before his untimely death, James Dean became an enduring icon of American film, one whose brooding non-conformity helped challenge rigid notions of masculinity.

James Byron Dean was born February 8, 1931 in Marion, Indiana. His mother, Mildred, died when he was nine, and Winton, his father, sent him to live with his grandparents. A talented youth who won high school dramatic competitions while attending Fairmount High School, Dean led a life of longing caused by the early death of his mother.

A star basketball player in high school, Dean lost his front teeth in a trapeze accident and had to wear false ones for the rest of his life. Despite this misfortune and his terrible eyesight, he excelled in acting and his brooding good looks promised success as a movie star. He soon left Indiana for Hollywood, where he struggled to land a few theater roles and bit parts in films.

In 1951, he took the advice of actor and teacher James Whitmore and traveled to New York. Although admitted to Lee Strasburg's Actors Studio, Dean rarely attended classes at the prestigious acting school. Nevertheless, he immersed himself in the techniques of method acting. Hence, as an actor, he is often compared with such other young method actors of the period as Montgomery Clift and Marlon Brando.

In New York, Dean found work in television commercials, which in turn led to stage jobs. In 1952, he was cast in N. Richard Nash's *See the Jaguar*, a play that ran only five days on Broadway. Brief as it was, however, Dean's exposure in *See the Jaguar* garnered him opportunities as a television actor and a role on Broadway as an Arab boy who seduces a male British tourist in the stage production of André Gide's *The Immoralist* (1954).

Despite his success in *The Immoralist*, Dean quit the show only three weeks after its opening in order to fly to Hollywood to begin filming *East of Eden* (1955). On the set of *East of Eden*, Dean had disagreements with director Elia Kazan, but he delivered an unusually mature and affecting performance as Cal, the young protagonist of the sprawling family drama based on John Steinbeck's novel.

Off-camera, Dean studied dance with Eartha Kitt and painted erotic pictures of bullfighters. He had several torrid romances with actresses and, according to some biographers, with men as well. Among the men cited as having had affairs with Dean are actors Clifton Webb, Bill Bast, and Jack Simmons, as well as producer Rogers Brackett.

Dean's engagement to actress Pier Angeli temporarily quieted rumors of his bisexuality, despite his having been widely quoted as saying, when pressed about his orientation, that he "wouldn't go through life with one hand tied behind [his] back." Angeli's abrupt breaking off of the engagement and her subsequent marriage to singer Vic Damone left Dean alone and the subject of further speculation.



A photograph of James Dean taken during the filming of *Giant* (1956). Image courtesy Howard Frank Archives. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 License.

Dean hurled himself into his work on director Nicholas Ray's *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), the film, released soon after his death, that would establish him as an enduring Hollywood star. A classic film about teenage alienation and angst, it features prominently a gay subtext embodied in the relationship between the characters portrayed by Dean and Sal Mineo.

In its honesty and tenderness, the relationship between these characters, coded though it is, has touched several generations of gay youth. As Jim Stark, who lovingly accepts and protects Mineo's adoring Plato, Dean conveyed a new, non-conformist masculinity that boldly challenged the rigid gender-role expectations of 1950s America.

After completing *Rebel without a Cause*, Dean began working on director George Stevens's epic *Giant* (1956), based on the Edna Feber novel. In this film, Dean's transformation from farmhand to oil baron is astonishing. On-set tempers flared between Dean and then-closeted co-star Rock Hudson, according to accounts by Dean's friend and co-star Elizabeth Taylor.

Soon after finishing all his scenes for *Giant*, Dean, a race car enthusiast, went for a drive with mechanic Rolf Weutherich in his prize Silver Spyder Porsche on September 30, 1955. The drive proved fatal, as Dean was nearly decapitated in a car accident near Salinas, California. His untimely death, just as he was on the verge of a major acting career, catapulted him to fame and helped make both *Rebel without a Cause* and *Giant* box office hits.

Film studios were deluged with thousands of fan letters to the actor who had spent less than two years in Hollywood. An obsessive cult-like following soon developed and Dean's image, usually in a black t-shirt and with a cigarette dangling from his mouth, quickly became one of the most recognizable symbols of 1950s youth culture.

Numerous films, plays, documentaries, photographs, artworks, and advertising images attempt to capture the spirit of Dean's allure, but the actor's charisma continues to be vital, at least in part because he is shrouded in mystery. The image of Dean in the *Rebel* red windbreaker remains an icon of twentieth-century pop culture.

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Jim Provenzano, a sports columnist for the *Bay Area Reporter*, is also a fiction writer. He is author of a novel, *Pins*, and of numerous short stories.