



Sal Mineo.

Mineo, Sal (1939-1976)

by Peter J. Holliday

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Although actor Sal Mineo was twice nominated for an Academy Award, and enjoyed success as a stage director and recording artist, he is remembered chiefly for his performance in *Rebel without a Cause* and for the brutal murder that ended his life just as he was on the verge of reinventing himself and his career.

He was born Salvatore Mineo, Jr. in the Bronx, New York on January 10, 1939. His parents, who had emigrated from Sicily, made caskets for a living.

The actor began his career playing sad-eyed juveniles and progressed to leading stage, film, and television roles. Following dismissal from a parochial school at eight as a troublemaker, Mineo attended dancing classes and was cast two years later as a child in the Broadway production of Tennessee Williams' *The Rose Tattoo* (1951).

He made his first film appearance in 1955, and subsequently appeared in many screen productions, typically portraying troubled youths. Yet Mineo's career was dominated by a single role that swiftly achieved mythic status: his Plato in Nicholas Ray's *Rebel without a Cause* (1955).

In his provocative analysis, Robin Wood argues that *Rebel without a Cause* is the only film in which Mineo's character is clearly coded as gay. The film deals with a disturbed teenager, Jim (James Dean), who moves into town with an ineffective father (Jim Backus) and a domineering mother (Ann Doran) and becomes friends with two confused adolescents, Judy (Natalie Wood) and Plato (Mineo).

Although *Rebel* intermittently transcends its textbook sociology basis, it is a striking example of a great opportunity missed: it opens up the possibility of constructing an alternative, non-repressive and non-authoritarian sexual/familial structure, then opts for restoring "normality" at the end.

The three teenage characters move towards creating an alternative, mutually caring and protective family, with Jim as father, Judy as mother, and Plato as child. Yet this archetype is disturbed and complicated by the continual threat (produced as much by the sexual ambiguity of the Dean persona as by the presence of Mineo) of a sexual dimension in the men's relationship.

To repudiate (rather than resolve) those implications the film has Jim become preoccupied with Judy. Significantly, the vital move for completing this operation is the elimination of Plato, the character who--far more than Jim or Judy--resists assimilation into bourgeois culture.

Typically, as with the film's other teenage characters, Plato's "problem" is explained in terms of an unsatisfactory family background; nevertheless, during the central sequences in the abandoned mansion, his gayness achieves a resonance that escapes the film's glib sociologizing. For his role as Plato, Mineo received an Academy Award nomination as best supporting actor.

Mineo's screen persona had two aspects: vulnerability and aggressiveness. If *Rebel without a Cause* offered the most complete realization of the former, the latter perhaps received fullest expression in *Cheyenne Autumn* (1964), where Mineo played a transgressive and intractable Native American brave.

In directing Mineo as Dov Landau in *Exodus* (1960), Otto Preminger made possible the ideal fusion of these two aspects. Landau is surely Mineo's finest performance, though, ironically, it is achieved by the explicit repudiation of the character's gay connotations.

The extraordinary intensity of the interrogation scene, in which Landau shamefully and painfully admits, "They used me as you would use a woman," is due primarily to Mineo's combination of vulnerability and aggression.

Other films in which Mineo appeared include *Giant* (1956), *The Gene Krupa Story* (1959), *Who Killed Teddy Bear* (1965), and *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965). He also had a modest success in the 1950s as a rock 'n' roll singer.

Mineo received his second Oscar nomination for his supporting performance in *Exodus*. Nevertheless, despite this recognition, his film career declined precipitously thereafter, as he was mostly limited to playing ethnic characters.

Mineo's homosexuality was a fairly open secret even at the height of his Hollywood success. He was rumored to have pursued numerous affairs, including one with Ray during the filming of *Rebel without a Cause*.

With maturity, he sought to explore his homosexuality more fully in both his life and his art. Although he appeared in several television productions and films, in his latter years he increasingly found the theater more supportive of his aspirations.

In 1969, he directed the Broadway and West Coast productions of *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, John Herbert's exploration of power roles in situational homosexuality at a Canadian prison. Mineo's production was controversial for its nudity and simulated sex.

In 1976, Mineo was cast in a Los Angeles production of James Kirkwood's *P. S. Your Cat Is Dead*. As he returned to his West Hollywood apartment from a rehearsal on February 12, 1976, he was stabbed to death. The murder remains cloaked in mystery. A suspect who initially confessed later recanted, but was nevertheless convicted.

Over the years, some of Mineo's friends and relatives have claimed that the authorities, eager to solve a high profile murder case, charged the wrong man.

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