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55 days at Peking, Ray, Nicholas, 1963

The true story of Jesse James, Ray, Nicholas, 1957

They live by night, Ray, Nicholas, 1949

TAKE ONE

By Michael Goodwin and Naomi Wise

NICHOLAS RAY REBEL!

Nick Ray matters. In fact, as times roll along and filmmaking styles roll with them, Ray matters more and more.

It seems to us that the great Hollywood filmmakers can be broken down into two groups: the Classicists, such as Ford, Hawks and Walsh, who broke no new ground (at least structurally and ideologically); and the Romantics, or Experimentalists, best typified by Nick Ray, who did.

Anyone who knows our critical writing knows that we respect the Classicists; we are not suggesting that experimentation, in and of itself, is essential to the making of great art. What we *are* saying is that while filmmakers like Ford worked within the dramatic and cinematic structures they inherited, enriching and strengthening them, filmmakers like Ray were pushing back the boundaries of film art — both in terms of structure and ideology.

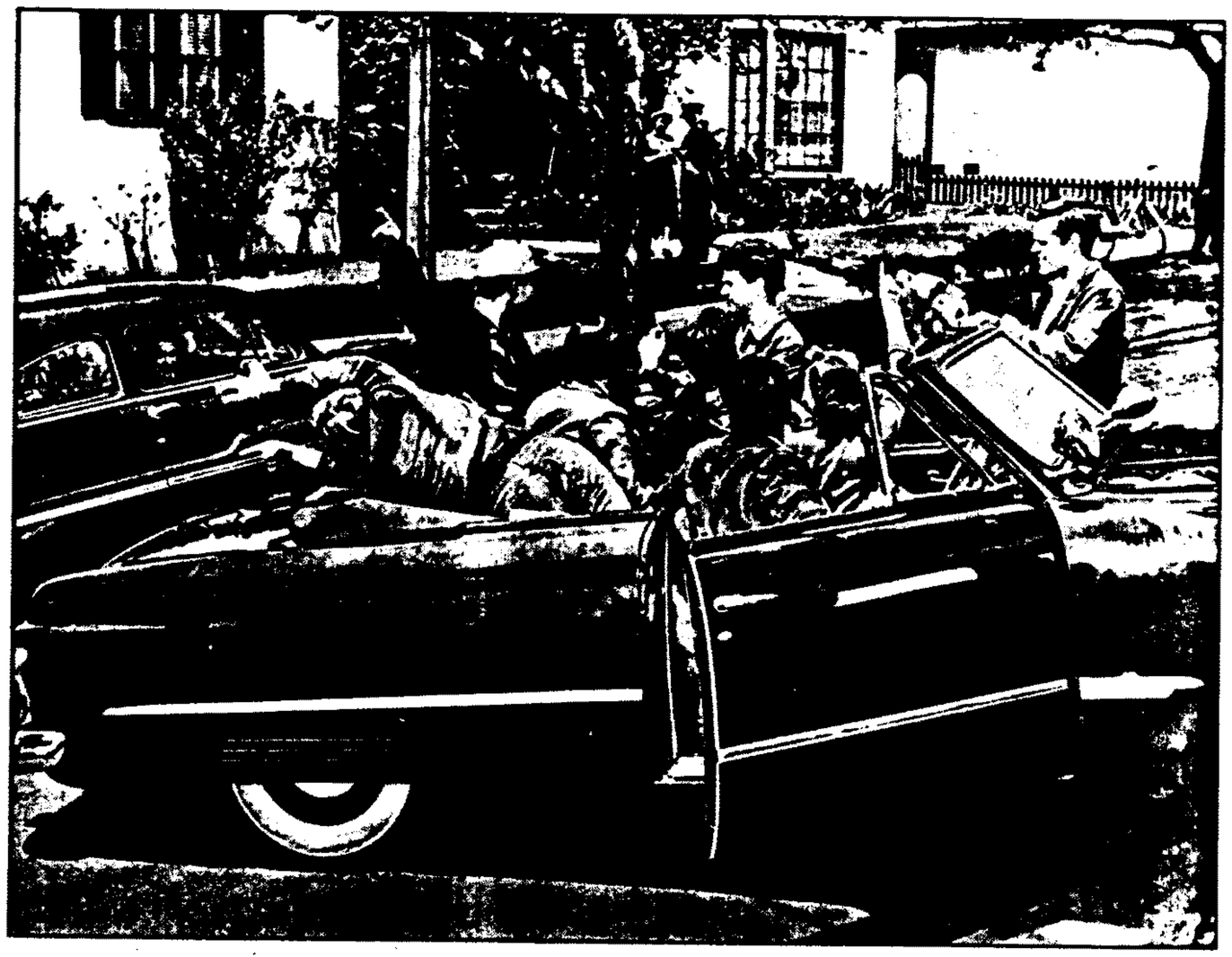
One simply cannot imagine Hawks, for instance, stating: "I set out to break every rule there was to break." Yet, coming from Ray (in our discussion of *Johnny Guitar*), such a comment seems perfectly in character — even unsurprising. When an artist sets out to expand old forms, or forge new ones, he or she takes a great chance. The possibilities for failure are greater, and the failures themselves are likely to be major ones. Thus, while a minor Ford film may still be quite good on a number of levels, a minor Ray can be utterly dreadful. Knowing this, Ray still found the courage to experiment, the willingness to risk failure, the commitment to push cinema to the limits of its possibilities and beyond. These are some of the reasons Nick Ray matters.

Ray's structural innovations are many — his disturbingly ambiguous endings (bigger Than Life), his films-without-plot (*Rebel*), his cross-genre hybrids (*Party Girl*), and his ground-breaking use of CinemaScope. But beyond structure, it is in the areas of ideology and psychology that his greatest achievements can be seen. Ray is a thoroughly modern filmmaker, perhaps the greatest of the native American existentialists; we think this is one of the reasons the 'cahiers' crowd finds him of such interest.

The psychological substructure of Ray's films is uncommonly rich and complex. No other filmmaker has rendered the basic American contradictions, both political and social, with Ray's insight and impact. His characters are the sons and daughters of the American dream — but it is a dream gone sour. At the heart of Ray's cinema lies the anguish of living from day to American day; his characters suffer not only their own personal agony, but the agony forced on them by a cruel and oppressive system.

If Ray had merely "used" these recurring themes, his films would be little more than sociological tracts. But the immediacy and impact of his films make it unmistakeably clear that he has drawn upon his own confusion, his own anguish, for the characters and conflicts that make his movies as real (and as horrid) as a headline. Nicholas Ray is even more interesting than his movies — but it is only through his movies that we can truly see him.

The question may be raised: How can we cite Ray as an important experimentalist without noting the *more* extreme experiments of the "underground"? We answer as follows: While the underground cinema has always aimed at an elite avant-garde, Ray has worked within the mainstream, aiming his films at a mass audience. Functioning as a vanguard, it has been Ray's intention, and function, to *take that mass audience along with him.* In this, we feel, lies his greatest achievement.



Rebel without a Cause

All too often the experimentalist fails to look behind him to see if anyone is there. For this reason, many important and worthwhile films have never found an audience. Ray's continuing concern for his audience makes him an exemplary model — not only for the new generation of filmmakers (which has clearly been influenced by him already), but for innovators working in all the media.

Ray has paid a price for his access to the mass audience. A socially-conscious artist who struggles from within the system opens himself not only to criticism from the rear-guard for going too far, but criticism from himself for not going far enough. This inner conflict (which, in Ray, approaches self-loathing for the necessary compromises he has made) is the single most significant undertone in his work.

It is our thesis that the conflict Ray experienced in making even the best of his films is precisely that element which makes them great. His films constitute comments on themselves, on-going auto-critiques from a master filmmaker who asked more of himself than any person should. Admittedly, Ray made things harder on himself than he had to — like Welles, he was too proud, too smart, too fast and too heavy for Hollywood's comfort. Nonetheless, there are limitations inherent in the path of reformism; Ray's glorious defeats mark them precisely.

In writing about Ray's films, we have found it impossible to comment on his characters without commenting on him as well; his total involvement in them makes it difficult to do otherwise. Also, we have tended away from a rigorous technical analysis. For one thing, Godard, Rohmer, Truffaut and others have already covered this ground exhaustively and effectively. But we find the human dimension of Ray's films more important. The tension that underlies his best work *is the* tension of struggle, the tension of life.

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In a tiny editing room in the basement of the Bleecker Street Cinema in New York City, Nick Ray is pacing, raging, burning — surrounded by snips of film and tape, reels, film cans and overflowing ashtrays. He's fighting time, fighting space, to get *We Can't Go Home Again* ready for an investor's screening tomorrow. He won't make it.

"Hey, man, do you know where we can get a couple of movieolas?" asks Ray. "We need a 16 and a 35."

"You don't have editing equipment?"

"Well, it comes and it goes. I've been up for 72 hours, trying to put this film together, and at this point I'm really busy, so whatever you can pick up . . . Oh, Jesus, I must call Bill Kunstler and tell him about the screening tomorrow, so . . ."

It's hot in the editing room, and Ray is stripped down to a pair of red corduroy bell-bottoms. He's a tall, intense man with white hair — and an eye patch that makes him look like a kindly pirate. He may have been up for 72 hours, but he's wired — sweeping back and forth across the room, scattering instructions and asides, sending people out for supplies, fielding phone calls and trying to pick just the right ten-second section from a recording of *Wozzeck* that's playing on a tinny phonograph.

Ray's most recent commercial feature was *55 Days at Peking*, completed in 1963 — an experience so unpleasant for him that he swore he'd never make another Hollywood film. He had, as he puts it, had his bag packed for eight years before that. From Europe to Chicago to New York, Ray began living by his wits, living for his art. He took a position at Harpur College in upstate New York, teaching filmmaking. The student film that resulted, *We Can't Go Home Again*, began to absorb all his energy and all his funds. Now, after two years at Harpur, he was back in New York City to finish it.

"Screening this thing is the foolishest damn thing I could do," he mumbles as he crosses the room, "but I'm absolutely desperate. The film is much better than it's going to look tomorrow."

The next day, the screening is cancelled because of "unforeseen difficulties." "There's amazing stuff in reel two," says Ray.

"Good or bad?"

"Terrible. Someone's been tampering with the film, putting in stuff I've never seen before."

A few weeks later, Ray and his student crew arrived in San Francisco for a retrospective tribute at the Pacific Film Archive. He was still editing around the clock at Cine Manifest, a small San Francisco studio, but he found time to attend a number of PFA showings, introducing the films and answering questions.

Despite his fatigue, he was magnetic — spinning out fascinating anecdotes, transforming banal queries into intelligent ones, fielding tough criticisms from Berkeley's aggressive audiences. From time to time, though, a question would snag on some unspoken personal riddle, and Ray would pace back and forth in front of the blank screen, a distracted lion, listening to some inner voice or free-associating answers to questions no one had asked.

Ray was still driving himself to the limit, skipping meals and sleeping on the floor of the editing room when he slept at all. We were hesitant to call him for an interview. Then, quite by accident, we ran into him one night at a museum showing of leftist political films from the 1930s. As the house lights went on and the audience discussion grew heated, we spotted Ray in the crowd, dressed in black, leaning silently against the rear wall. He was intensely visible; in fact, in some mysterious way he was the electric center of the room. Suddenly it occurred to us that James Dean had been playing Nick Ray.

We offered him a lift back to Cine Manifest. He offered us a drink. At a sinister bar nearby we chatted on about the continuity of the Left, and somewhere along the line we arranged for an interview the next day.

It was raining hard when we dropped him off near the studio, at the corner of 11th and Folsom — a district that could pass for a B-movie set. Winos huddled in dark doorways, red neons flashed from the corner bars, and Nick Ray, in a wrecked suede jacket, knapsacked, eyepatched, pot-bellied and stubbled, loped wearily down Folsom Street past the men and the bars and disappeared into a doorway. It would have made a good shot in someone's movie.

Nicholas Ray was born in 1911. He thumbed his way to New York City in 1932 with the idea of getting into the theater. After a brief association with Frank Lloyd Wright, he joined the Workers' Laboratory in 1934 — a leftist theater group that played "every strike, every picket line, political campaigns, the backs of trucks."

During the next few years he taught theater at Brooklyn Labor College, mounted a production of Dos Passos' *Body of an American* at Madison Square Garden, and became a part of the New York folk music subculture. When the WPA theater project started, he went to Washington, D.C., where he headed the community theater program. Eventually, he became the director of adult education for the WPA: recreation, music, theater, even a toy repair project.

Several theatrical ventures with Elia Kazan and Joseph Losey followed, and a folk music program for CBS Radio called *Forecast* which ran for over a year. During World War II, Ray worked for the OSS and the OWI. "I did propaganda," he remembers, "underground radio to get into Poland, Germany, Czechoslovakia. Hell, I directed in Czech, Finn . . . I never missed a laugh. I couldn't understand a word of Czech, but I understood every laugh."

When the war ended, Ray went to California with Kazan, to work on *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. "I wrote additional dialogue, I directed all the sketches for every scene with the sketch artists. And I spent a lot of time with the editors. I'd bring them cartoons from the funny papers, and say, 'Why don't we edit this way? The hell with conventionality.' "

When *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* was finished, Ray headed back to New York — but it was to be a short stay. "I'd asked Dore Schary if he'd read something I'd written — an adaptation of a book called *Thieves Like Us*, by Edwin Anderson. About a month later, Dore became head of RKO. I got a call from him: 'Hey, you wanta direct *Thieves Like Us*?' I said, 'You bet your ass I do!' He said, 'Who do you want for a producer?' I said, 'Houseman.' He said, 'When can you get out here?' That's how it happened, just pure luck. We retitled it *They Live By Night*."

THEY LIVE BY NIGHT [RKO, 1947]

Bowie (Farley Granger) breaks out of prison, meets Keechie (Cathy O'Donnell), and they fall in love. A series of hold-ups follows, and the lovers take to the road in a desperate try for freedom. Happy for the first time, they wish only to be together — but Bowie's decision to stay clean is frustrated when his one-time confederate, Howard Da Silva, finds him and insists that he take part in one last, abortive caper. Once again in hiding, the lovers make a pathetic try at a "normal" evening — they go out for dinner at a small club, where a black woman sings "Your Red Wagon." Recognized at the club, they flee again — but their "friends" inform on them, and Bowie is killed by the police.

They Live By Night is basically a love story, despite its setting in the criminal subculture. Far more lyrical than *Bonnie and Clyde*, it concentrates on character delineation and societal analysis rather than gun-play and brutality. It is, like most of Nick Ray's movies, a tragedy — but unlike traditional tragedies that grow out of the conflict between the insanely competitive

American society and the "criminal" innocents' hopeless struggle for freedom.

Ray's characteristic themes emerge clearly in this, his first film. The characters are social outcasts who desire nothing more than freedom. But the freedom offered them is illusory; they're only more entangled in social and moral traps.

Ray: It's my favorite film. When I started it, I took a first-time-out cameraman, George Diskant. For the first shot, I told him I wanted the lens as close to the stage floor as possible. He said, "I'll have to saw a hole in the stage floor." I said, "I don't care what you do." He said, "It'll take me 40 minutes." It took him 20, and we made the next three films together. I suppose I like *They Live By Night* because every mistake in it is mine.

Something happens in They Live By Night *that seems to recur in a number of your films — the central scene is intensified through the music. When the nightclub singer does "Your Red Wagon," the tension becomes nearly unbearable.*

Ray: Well, how about the musical transition when they set the car on fire and the radio is playing, (Ray sings:) "Well, I'm going down the road feeling bad . . ." *"Your Red Wagon"* was sung by a girl who had been in *Beggar's Holiday*, Marie Bryant. The arrangement was a little square for us, so we juiced it up a bit.

Yeah, but the lyrics . . . I mean, from that point the whole thing is just downhill all the way . . .

Ray: (singing) "If you get loaded and act the clown, be the laughing stock of all the town, it's your red wagon . . ." If you've done musicals on Broadway, and you go out on the road with 18 songs, knowing you're gonna come in with 14, you make your selection on the basis of whether the song advances the story or not. Something I learned both from experience and from Rodgers and Hammerstein. That nightclub scene is the climax of their being real people.

KNOCK ON ANY DOOR [COLUMBIA, 1949]

Humphrey Bogart plays a lawyer called upon to defend a juvenile delinquent, John Derek, accused of killing a cop. Most of the film takes place in flashback, and concentrates on the social determinants of delinquency. The courtroom climax involves an unexpected reversal: under cross-examination, Derek breaks and admits his guilt. The film concludes with Bogart's impassioned plea for relief of the conditions that breed crime.

An eloquent document on juvenile delinquency, *Knock On Any Door* suffers, to a certain extent, from a simplistic "liberal" emphasis on the old saw "there are no bad boys, only good boys driven to the bad." What makes this attitude so embarrassing in retrospect is its determinist underpinning: implicit is the idea that freedom of decision and character are purely illusory, that individual character (even that of the social outcast) is utterly predestined by social conditions. The individual has no choice whatsoever.

Today, the absolutism of this position seems naive.

Knock on Any Door

Nonetheless, the conviction with which Ray states his case, and the superbly controlled performances by Bogart and Derek, carry the film over its thematic problems and into the realm of hard-hitting period melodrama.

Knock On Any Door *strikes me as being more socially conscious than* They Live By Night.

Ray: Man, look! *They Live By Night* was done in a period of post-war affluence. *Nobody* was making pictures about poor people. Nobody was saying that used car lot owners are thieves.

OK, I hear you, but Knock On Any Door *seems more verbal about its ideology. Will you buy that?*

Ray: Yes, but by this time socially conscious film was becoming acceptable, whereas at the time of *They Live By Night* you had to do either boy-meets-girl or else a war movie. I still think it's less effective than *They Live By Night*. I wish Bunuel had made *Los Olvidados* before I made *Knock On Any Door*, because I would have made a hell of a lot better film.

Did you think of Knock On Any Door *as a message film?*

Ray: I never think of *any* film as a message film. I never think of a film as doing anything except providing a heightened sense of being.

Not as an ideological tool?

Ray: I should think my character had been formed long enough for me not to have to think about that. Sure, you have to have a point of view — and the audience can accept it or reject it. But I don't want to manipulate an audience. My own character, my own point of view, my bloodstream . . . whatever emotional and intellectual response, I have to take for granted. If I had to do a film I didn't want to do, but had to for bread and taxes, *then* I'd have to intellectualize it. I research my films very carefully, but if I had to bend my instinct to a creed, I don't think I would have a signature.

Bogart was an absolute fucking dream. Goddamn, he was great! The last scene. Bogart was so wonderful in that scene. I was laying it out, and I said, "Bogey, it seems to me that the content of the scene more or less demands that you start here, then address the jury, the press . . ." And about the third move, he's aware that whenever I stop the grip is making a cross mark, for the crane to stop on. And Bogey turns around and says, "You son of a bitch, are you planning to shoot this all in one?" I said, "I want to rehearse with the camera once, all in one, just to get the rhythm of it." He said, "You're lying to me, you son of a bitch! Do you realize that I haven't had to say more than three lines at one time for the last 15 years?" I said, "By God, now that you mention it it might be a good idea if we do it all in one." He said, "I'll fire you." I said, "You already did once, and then you called me at three in the morning to get you home. You can try it again if you want to."

Finally I said, "OK, get ready for a take." He said, "You're gonna go through with it!" "Yup." The first take was perfect. I said, "Once more, for protection:" The second take was even better. "That's it." A nine-minute take!

The ending seems a little corny now, but it was kind of avant-garde at the time because it wasn't the kind of ending that ties up a movie in a nice pink ribbon. I like the film, although I would have changed a few things. I don't particularly like the flashback technique.

JOHNNY GUITAR [REPUBLIC, 1953]

In a wild Arizona valley, a lady named Vienna (Joan Crawford) runs a gambling hall. The railroad is coming through, and her land will be valuable. Her neighbors, particularly Emma Small (Mercedes McCambridge), regard her with hatred and suspicion — as much for her bold, "masculine" lifestyle as for her coveted land. While an outlaw called the Dancing Kid (Scott Brady) and an ex-gunfighter named Johnny Guitar (Sterling Hayden) vie for Vienna's favors, Emma incites the Marshall to throw Vienna out of town. When Vienna is (falsely) implicated in a bank robbery, a lynch mob

burns her saloon to the ground and nearly hangs her. The mob tracks Johnny and Vienna to the Kid's hideout, where a savage gunfight between the two women ends the film.

In *Johnny Guitar* it becomes clear that Ray's involvement in his characters is more than ordinary; with each successive film, his protagonists seem more and more to reflect his own personality and concerns. At the age of 41, he creates in the character of Vienna a fully adult social outcast; no longer the young innocent persecuted by circumstances, Vienna's outlawry is a matter of her own choice. Ethically, financially, and sexually self-determining, Vienna is persecuted not merely for her difference from her neighbors, but for her too-obvious superiority.

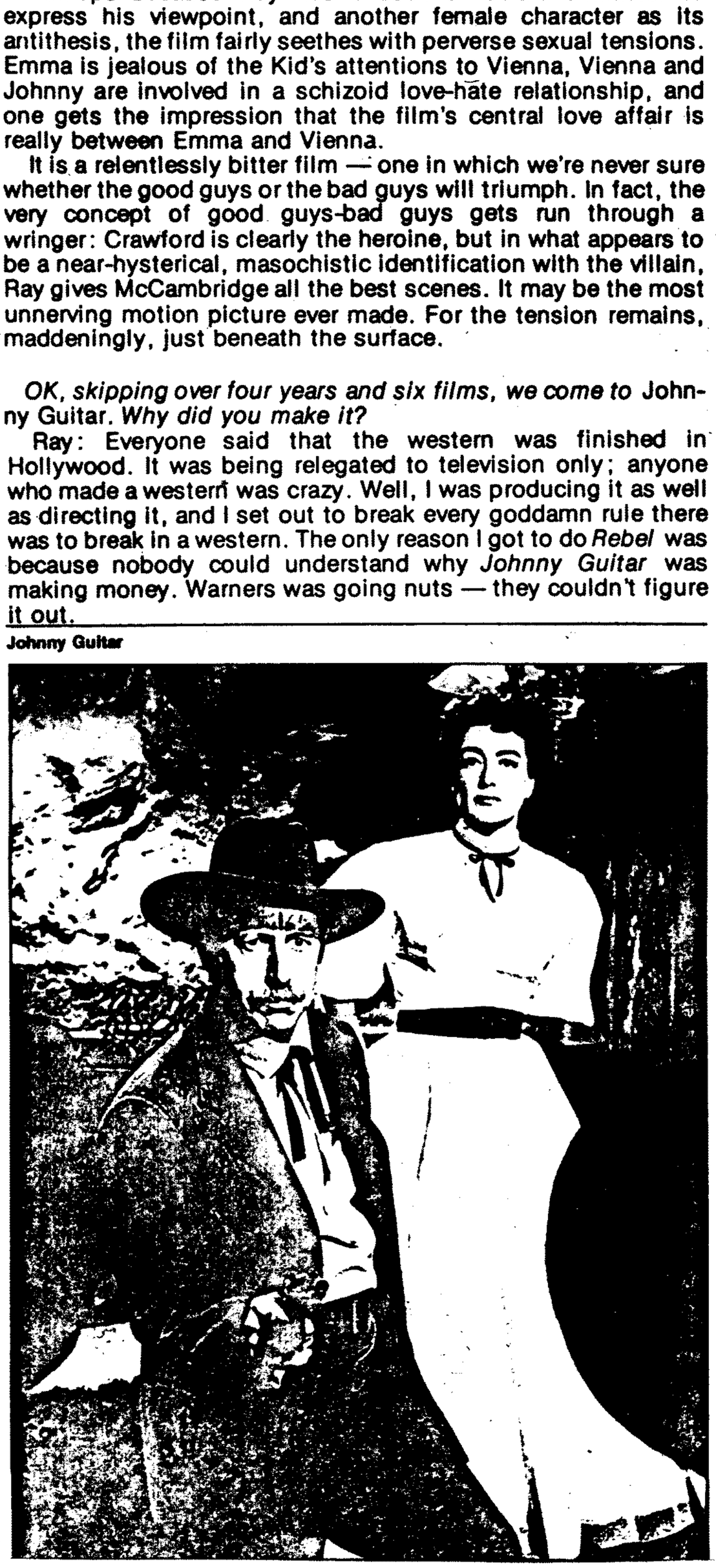
Perhaps because Ray has chosen a female character to express his viewpoint, and another female character as its antithesis, the film fairly seethes with perverse sexual tensions. Emma is jealous of the Kid's attentions to Vienna, Vienna and Johnny are involved in a schizoid love-hate relationship, and one gets the impression that the film's central love affair is really between Emma and Vienna.

It is a relentlessly bitter film — one in which we're never sure whether the good guys or the bad guys will triumph. In fact, the very concept of good guys-bad guys gets run through a wringer: Crawford is clearly the heroine, but in what appears to be a near-hysterical, masochistic identification with the villain, Ray gives McCambridge all the best scenes. It may be the most unnerving motion picture ever made. For the tension remains, maddeningly, just beneath the surface.

OK, skipping over four years and six films, we come to Johnny Guitar. *Why did you make it?*

Ray: Everyone said that the western was finished in Hollywood. It was being relegated to television only; anyone who made a western was crazy. Well, I was producing it as well as directing it, and I set out to break every goddamn rule there was to break in a western. The only reason I got to do *Rebel* was because nobody could understand why *Johnny Guitar* was making money. Warners was going nuts — they couldn't figure it out.

Johnny Guitar



I told Phil Yordan, who was writing the script, 'This is the structure. I never want Crawford and Hayden to have a love scene. I want them always to be interrupted, either by themselves or by the kid and his gang. Never let the tension relax for a second."

How about the tension between the two women?

Ray: I asked Mercedes McCambridge to do an acting job beyond the call of duty. "Mercedes, I want you to play this all the way through — unremittingly — as the sulphuric acid that cuts through Crawford's sweetness and light. Without any let-up." And she did it, and she was beautiful.

Some critics have inferred a lesbian relationship between Crawford and McCambridge.

Ray: It never entered my mind. But that's fine, that's the sort of thing you just have to feel free enough to release.

One certainly feels that the women are more closely involved with each other than with any of the men.

Ray: Absolutely. It had to be. They both had to be pretty damn strong to overcome . . . There are some pretty strong men in that film. And the sexual tension between the women is a very normal tension.

One night in Sedona, on location, I was cruising the camp around 11 o'clock to see that there was no bloody crap games going on among the wranglers. And I saw a female figure walking toward the filling station, a little bit unsteadily. It had to be Joan. I went up to the station, and Joan was on the telephone carrying on the goddamndest conversation with the operator — who was obviously saying, "We don't *take* language like that, Miss Crawford." And Joan was yelling, "Goddammit, I want you to call the limousine service and have a limousine here for me first thing in the morning, *get me out of here!" At* this point, I noticed that the highway was covered with women's clothes — she had taken all of Mercedes' clothing and thrown it on the highway!

I realized why. That morning, after I shot her scenes, I had sent Joan back to camp because I didn't want her around while I was doing the scene where Mercedes addresses the posse. I had done two or three takes with Mercedes, and the third one went very well. I was pleased, and so was everyone else; cast and crew alike burst into applause. The moment they did, I looked over my shoulder and saw Miss Crawford sitting up on the hill, watching. I should have known some hell was going to break loose.

Did that interpersonal tension run through the entire film?

Ray: After that, yes. Quite a few times I would have to stop the car and vomit before I got to work in the morning.

Did you suspect that the film would be such a critical success? A masterpiece?

Ray: I never think in those terms. I knew it was the most baroque thing I'd ever attempted. And very deliberately. Putting Joan against a red stone wall, dressed in a white Venetian lace dress, with a posse dressed in black and white coming in like vultures. It was a go-for-broke idea.

Did many people understand the relationship between the posse and the McCarthy Committee?

Ray: Oh yes. In Barcelona, when I went there to receive an award of some kind, I learned that *Johnny Guitar* had split the city in half on political lines.

Were you personally hassled by the Committee at any time?

Ray: No. For one thing, I had been very thoroughly investigated by the OSS. "On the night of so and so, such and such a young lady was seen to enter your apartment at 8:30 at night, and not leave until eight the next morning. What do you have to say to that?" "It was a delightful evening." There were lots of questions like that. Finally, I said, "Gentlemen, when I volunteered to serve the United States in this war, I was not asked to take a vow of celibacy." But they knew every goddamned thing about me, so I didn't care too much about this McCarthy bum.

There were certain traps that every studio had, and the one at RKO was a film called *I Married A Communist.* I had spent the whole summer turning down films, one after another. After I had turned down maybe 14 films, finally comes *I Married A Communist.* It was so ludicrous — like a 1971 Hearst editorial,

Johnny Guitar

with the bomb-throwing Communist — I thought we might make a comedy out of it. I got calls from my friends on the left: "Nick, what the hell are you doing? Are you out of your mind?" I'd say, "Shut up!" and hang up the phone.

After eight weeks I saw that it was just inherently so sick that there was no way of making anything out of it. The executive producer of the studio was a guy named Sid, who would sit around his office, patiently waiting hour after hour for the little red button to flash that meant Howard Hughes was calling. I told him, "Sid, I can't make it." Fifteen minutes later he was down in my office, apoplectic and shaking: *"Howard* wants to see you." I said, "Fine, I've never met the gentleman. Where do I see him?" "He wants you to meet him at Goldwyn Studios, in his office, at 12:30. You go into the second door from the right hand side as you face Santa Monica Boulevard. It looks like the janitor's entrance."

It *did* look like the janitor's entrance. I went in, and the only person there is this thin, lanky fellow: Howard Hughes. "Mr. Hughes, my name is Nicholas Ray." "Hello, Nick, had lunch yet?" He pulls a sandwich out of one pocket and a pint of milk out of another pocket, and says, "Share this with me." "Hey, Mr. Hughes —" "Say, Nick, don't you know that if you call an executive by Mr. instead of his first name after you've met him for five minutes, you're always gonna call him mister?" "Thank you, Mr. Hughes."

He says, "Would you mind sitting down on this side? I'm a little deaf." "Well, we have friends in common, Mr. Hughes, who tell me that if you're standing at the stern of a boat and a dollar bill floats to the deck at the bow, you'll hear it fall." Hughes says, "Why can't you make the film, Nick?" "I can't make a good one for you, Mr. Hughes." "Why not?"

"Mr. Hughes," I say, "I learned to fly when I was 15, 16 years old. I used to barnstorm county fairs. A few years after that I read one of the most poetic sentences I ever read — it was in the *Time Magazine* account of your flight around the world where you saw five sunsets in four days. I thought that was beautiful.

"And I know your will: When you crashed into two houses in Beverly Hills, and the doctor got there, you asked about your chances and he said 50-50. You spent the next 45 minutes dictating all your observations about what was wrong with the plane, before you turned to the doctor and said, 'OK, knock me out.'

"I know about your first film attempt, and the subsequent one. I know about your taking the same airplane you crashed and trying to get the bugs out of it. You couldn't, you built a building around it, tried to get the bugs out, you couldn't, and finally you destroyed the airplane.

"I can't get the bugs out of this script, Mr. Hughes. And forgive me for being presumptuous — you're a far more experienced man in all fields than I am — but I'd advise you not to keep trying. It's a loser."

He said, "That all you got to say?" I said, "Yup. But, Mr. Hughes, you may sue me from one of those suns in the east to the sun in the west and it won't change my mind."

A year later he asked me to run the studio for him.

Was that when you worked on Macao, *Von Sternberg's film? Herman Weinberg asked us to ask you about that.*

Ray: Yeah. When Hughes asked me to run the studio I said no, so he asked me to help him behind the scenes. He had three films which he couldn't possibly release, and *Macao* was one of them. It was very bad. I was in the process of getting a divorce from Gloria Grahame, who was in the film, and she said, "If you'll cut me out of the film entirely, you won't have to pay me alimony." It was that bad.

I reshot about 50%. My name isn't on it — I never let anyone know I had done it, until Von Sternberg began to get attention for it. I had called him to say I was going to do it, as long as he didn't disapprove. If he disapproved, I wouldn't touch it. He said, "Oh no, Nick, I'm here in New Jersey with my rose garden, I'm close to Wall Street and my art gallery. Go ahead." Then the cultist boys got hold of it and inflated it, and he began to say, "Well, if it hadn't been for goddamned Nick Ray it would have been a much *greater* film."

RUN FOR COVER [PARAMOUNT, 1954]

James Cagney, newly arrived in a small western town, is mistaken for a train robber and nearly lynched. The townspeople make amends by appointing him sheriff, and he embarks on a humanitarian law and order campaign — there will be no more lynchings. Much of the film concerns his relationship with a young deputy, John Derek, who (in a characterization closely related to the delinquent he played in *Knock On Any Door*) proves unworthy of the older man's trust.

Although the shifting moral relationship between Cagney and Derek provides some tension, the film seems diffuse and thin compared to Ray's major works.

Run For Cover *doesn't strike me as being particularly outstanding, if I may be blunt. I liked Cagney.*

Ray: This was the only time that Cagney was Cagney. I did the film because I got a call that Cagney wanted to do *Run For Cover,* and would come out of retirement if I directed it. I love this guy, so I did it.

There are some very good things in it. I refused to shoot the Indians behind the trees with bows and arrows. Instead, I had them playing a game on horseback. John Derek was good. And I like the scenes between Jimmy and Viveca Lindfors — that midwestern immigrant scene is something that I knew the rhythm of very well. So there *are* some good things . . .

I'm not saying it's a piece of shit, it's just —

Ray: Oh, it's a *terrible* story for Chrissake! It's an awful story. There's no conflict, none. You try to *breathe* it in there, but you can't. You don't have any bones to work with. But have you ever seen Cagney like that? Jimmy not only has a great serenity, such as I've not seen in an actor outside of Walter Huston, he has a great love of the earth and of his fellow man, an understanding of loneliness. I wanted to try and use all that. When I did my Chicago Conspiracy movie, I wanted him to play Judge Hoffman — either him or Groucho Marx.

So you were the one!

Ray: Well, I'm the one who wrote to Hoffman offering him $100,000. It wasn't Jerry Rubin's idea. I called Jimmy, and he said, "Nick, if I ever come out of retirement I'll do it because of you, but . . . not again."

REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE [WARNERS, 1955]

James Dean, a troubled adolescent, arrives in a new town with his family — a weak father and a domineering mother. He befriends Sal Mineo, another neglected child, and Natalie Wood, whose parents are harsh and unloving. All three youngsters are presented as potential delinquents. After a "chicken run" in which a boy is killed, Dean, Mineo and Wood hide from the police in an abandoned house. When friends of the dead boy arrive to take revenge, Mineo shoots one of them — and flees again to take refuge in a

planetarium. Dean follows him, takes away his gun, and convinces him to give himself up. When the two young men emerge from the planetarium, the police kill Mineo. The entire action of the film takes place within 24 hours.

Rebel was, of course, one of the classic films of the '50s — but it *stands*. Time has only confirmed its excellence. First, there is the performance in which James Dean defined himself — a performance so cinematic that it requires a camera to exist. With the flicker of an eyelid or a fleeting glance, Dean conveys great, complex segments of feeling and character.

In addition, there's Ray's astonishing evocation of the *zeitgeist*. *Rebel* seems even stronger now than it did in '55; not only are the dramatic and structural elements as effective as ever, but in the perspective afforded by 21 years we can appreciate the skill with which Ray pinpointed crucial data and ignored surrounding trivia.

If the film can be criticized at all, it would be for its surface ideology: the automatic indictment of the parents, the romantic absolution of the kids, and the sexist assumption that Dean's father is a failure because he doesn't dominate his wife. On this level, the complacent liberalism of the film conceals a fascist edge — the assumption that a healthy family requires strong, paternalist rule. Ray cannot be held primarily responsible for these elements — they are inextricably woven into the fabric of the time.

Furthermore, he undercuts them through the final transformation of the Dean character. At the beginning of the film, Jim is merely a sensitive misfit, blaming himself for his inability to function in society. At the end, in what is probably the most optimistic conclusion to any Ray film, Jim accepts himself and takes responsibility for his own life. He will no longer ask his father for advice; neither will he look to an authoritarian society for ethical guidance. He is self-defined, self-determining — and proud. No longer confused, Jim is now the genuine "rebel" of the title: his cry at the killing of Mineo is the cry of an adult being born.

As Ray said, in conversation, "They shot the wrong guy. Dean's the dangerous one."

Rebel *was your first CinemaScope film. I've always been very impressed with your use of Scope — I think you use it better than anyone else, with the possible exception of Truffaut in* Shoot the Piano Player. *Why did you start using it?*

Ray: Remember I worked with Frank Lloyd Wright? The horizontal line. I felt at home with Scope; if the environment is of such a nature that you don't have to force it, it's graceful to work with. On the other hand, in a film like *Wind Across the Everglades*, where you want height, where the trees and the birds are important, you can't use Scope.

Tell us about James Dean.

Ray: When I went out to Warners, I had a suite next to Kazan's. Gadge (Kazan) had asked me to come down and see a rough cut of *East of Eden*, and Dean was there. We said hello,

Rebel without a Cause

and from that time on we were like a couple of Siamese cats sniffing each other out. One day there was a knock on my door, I opened it, and this guy backwards somersaults into the room. It was Dean. Then another guy comes in, and a girl. Jimmy stays on the floor and says, "Hey, are you middle aged?" I say, "Yeah, I think so." He says, "Are you the guy who was trapped by a fire and ran back to pick up a box of puppies Bogart had given him, and went running bareass across Sunset Boulevard with it?" I say, "Yup." He turns to the other kids and says, "See? Same guy." Gets up and leaves.

Jimmy was living in a dressing room at Warner Brothers — he loved the sanctuary of those walls, and the protection from people. One day Warners said he couldn't live there any more — it was against insurance rules. He was furious, and went back to New York.

He lived in a five-floor walkup uptown. I went to see him, and there were matador posters on the walls, good music — and he was studying the score of *Harold In Italy*. All I had was 15 pages of script. I gave them to Dean to read, and I said, "This is all I have, but I know where I'm going. Will you do the film with me?" He said, "You're gonna leave tonight?"

"Yeah."

"Are you taking a taxi?"

"Yeah."

"Will you drop me at a drugstore?"

"Yeah, why? Is it urgent?"

"Yeah, what do you do for crabs?"

I said, "Well, you can go to the beach, pour alcohol over your hair, roll around in the sand, and let them get drunk and throw rocks at each other. Or else you can buy a bottle of Cuprics."

We took a taxi to the drugstore, he went in, came out with a bottle of Cuprics, leaned halfway into the taxi and said, "Yeah, I wanta work with you. We'll do this script. Shake on it?" We shook. "OK, I'm happy," he said. "But don't tell those bastards back there!" He had promised himself that he'd never work for Warners again.

How much of Jim is actually James Dean?

Ray: He was very imaginative. He didn't realize that the film was as good as it is until the first preview. He was taken aback by it — that he was so good. Because he was quite a bit better in it than he had been in *East of Eden* — although I think *Eden* is a remarkably good film. Dean was more spontaneous in *Rebel*, and we improvised very well together. With his imagination — well, in that sense he certainly helped shape the character. But that's a director's job, to help other people to contribute. One man can't do it; nobody can make a film by himself.

Were the other actors uneasy with Dean? Jealous?

Ray: Not for a minute. He worked *with* them — except in the close shots with Natalie. When he was off-camera he'd always try to break her up, and she'd go into tears. I had to play the scenes with her. But aside from that, he was as serious an artist as I've ever worked with.

I got a bonus for the film, and I took a 300SL Mercedes. Jimmy and I had decided to form our own company together, and I bought two stories: One was called *Heroic Love*, and the other was a film about a Mexican roadrace. We were going to chart the course of the race in the Mercedes, then put cameras on the car . . . We had our holiday place to stay in Nicaragua all picked out. The Mercedes arrived in Hollywood while Jimmy was finishing the dubbing on *Giant*. When he got killed, I sold the car — never drove it.

What was Heroic Love *like?*

Ray: This kid returns from the war. He's standing on the train platform in a small western town, and there to meet him is his hero, the distinguished senior attorney of the town. The boy's father and mother have died during the war, leaving him a ranch — which he has no taste for. He wants to become a lawyer, and read law under this man. The attorney is very moved, and invites the kid to stay at his home.

The attorney is married to a much younger woman who tries to seduce the young man. He rejects her. She begins to be vindictive, and one day, on a visit to his mentor's office, the young man finds her and the junior partner making love. But he never says a word about it. Instead, he goes on a campaign of

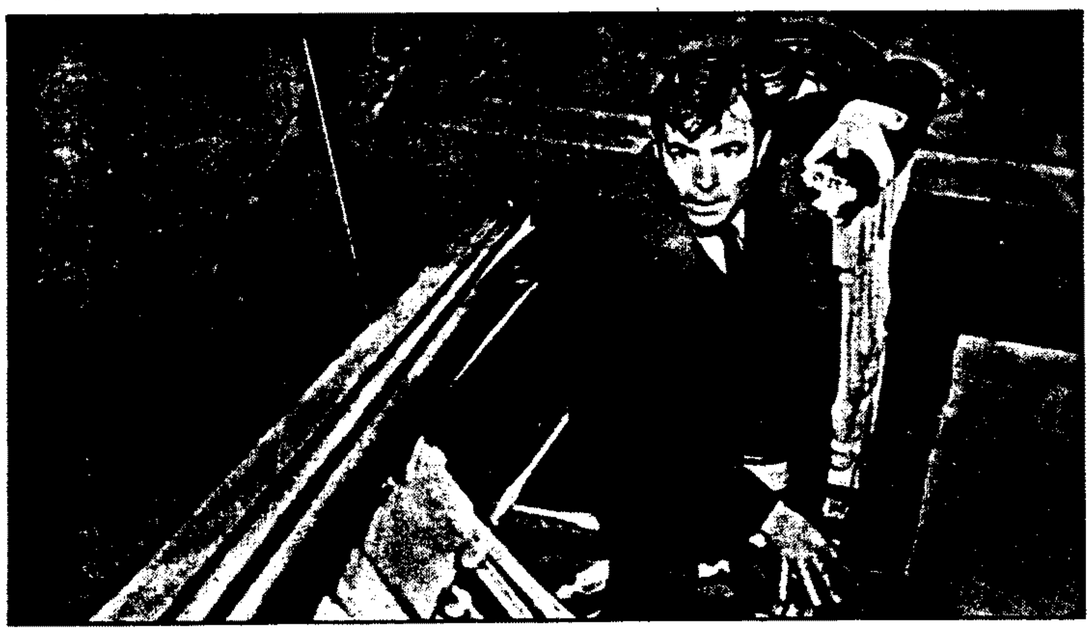
seducing every young girl in town. And all the mothers are up in arms, but they're also really jealous if their own daughters aren't seduced.

There's an incident when the Chinese cook in a restaurant goes mad and kills three people, including the sheriff, with a butcher knife. The young man, using his training, gets up on the roof and drops in through the chimney, talks to him, takes the knife away. He sees his mentor in the crowd, and gets him to bring a rifle so they can stave off any lynch mob. And the two of them sit there all night, protecting the Chinaman.

Subsequently the wife accuses the young man of trying to seduce her. The husband — knowing instinctively that she's been having an affair with *someone* — assumes that she's right. He calls the boy to the public square and horsewhips him out of town. The kid says nothing.

BIGGER THAN LIFE [20th CENTURY-FOX, 1956]

James Mason plays a lower-middle class schoolteacher who supports his family in an expensive upper-middle lifestyle by moonlighting at a taxicab company. When he contracts a fatal nerve disease he is given cortisone to save his life. Although the drug begins to produce paranoid delusions of grandeur, he must continue taking it to arrest the disease. At first Mason struggles against the side effects of the drug, but they prove so satisfying that he begins to overdose himself. Realizing that he is spiraling into psychosis, he tries to break the terrifying cycle, but since drug withdrawal would mean his death he cannot do so. Finally, he attempts to kill his son. Regaining consciousness in the hospital, he seems to have



Bigger than Life

come to terms with himself, and the film suggests that he will limit his drug intake in the future — but as none of the concrete conditions have changed, we are left with a sense of tragic ambiguity.

Everything about the film serves to suck us into Mason's subjective nightmare. His metamorphosis takes place in garishly bourgeois settings, constricting rooms filled with too much pastel furniture. Against this backdrop, Mason takes on a Satanic persona, smarter than God and twice as mean. What would be merely terrifying in another setting becomes, in this world of dens and dining rooms, pathetic as well. Mason's psychosis is the sickness underlying the stable facade of every petit-bourgeois who finds his or her life unbearable. The only road to freedom is madness.

Despite the optimistic ending, *Bigger Than Life* is a bleak, hopeless film; the best Mason can hope for, after his fall into madness, is a return to that awful maze of armchairs. Here, for the first time, we encounter the Nick Ray reverse-whammy false ending — a "happy end" so obviously tacked on that we hardly notice it. Instead, it seems to drop away of its own accord, leaving in its place the tragic conclusion that, one suspects, was there all along, dramatically and thematically necessary.

Jean-Luc Godard placed *Bigger Than Life* on his list of the Ten Best American Sound Films.

Skipping Hot Blood, *which I've never seen, brings us to* Bigger Than Life — *a weird movie! When we saw it, I kept waiting for it to take off, and it never seemed to. And then, when it was over, I suddenly felt as if I'd been hit by a cannonball. What's going on here?*

Ray: Conviction. I had very good help, too. James Mason, like Bogart, is a wonderful producer. I disliked the script very much — I liked the original story, but not the script. So every night I'd go to Clifford Odet's home and discuss the scenes coming up — and then go back to my house and write every night. We were winging it all the way through.

I'm satisfied with the film. Even the decor in *Bigger Than Life* represents an almost hopeless stretch for freedom — a tension that drives the schoolteacher, an underpaid, lower-middle class leader of youth, into moonlighting at a taxi company and trying to find a miracle in drugs.

The ending is a little bit corny and embarrassing — the unrealness of it embarrasses me at times. And it's unfortunate that I used the word "cortisone," because the film is really about . . . Don't expect miracles, from pulpit, doctor, analyst, college, drugs . . . It being cortisone gets it away from the fact that the character needs the drug as an habitual source of grandeur — which he needs as a person. It being cortisone reduces any chance for him to achieve a stretch for freedom, because cutting off the drug would have killed him.

THE TRUE STORY OF JESSE JAMES [20th CENTURY-FOX, 1956]

This is a fairly routine version of the same old Jesse James movie.

"That something went wrong from the point of view of the production is hardly in doubt; but not in the direction, where each shot carries the indelible mark of the most peculiarly modern of filmmakers . . . How does one recognize Nicholas Ray's signature? Firstly, by the compositions, which can enclose an actor without stifling him, and which somehow manage to make ideas as abstract as Liberty and Destiny both clear and tangible. Then ... by the editing device which is a feature of all Ray's work, and which consists of the sudden insertion, in a scene with several characters, of a shot of one of them who is only participating indirectly in the conversation. Finally, by a sensitivity to decor, which no other American director since Griffith has been able to use so vividly and powerfully. One is hardly likely to forget the twin leap into the river by the James Brothers and their mounts, the attack on the train shot by the superb Joe MacDonald, or the band of mysterious horsemen clad in white coats, riding at dawn through the plains of Minnesota. No need of false modesty; Nick Ray could go to the cinema to see this film he repudiates."

Jean-Luc Godard, Cahiers du Cinéma

I don't much care for Jesse James. *You?*

Ray: I think the dissolves in it are just fucking awful. As a result of that same fire I was in, I had cut my feet rather badly. So the minute I finished shooting *Jesse James* I went into the hospital. They edited the film while I was in there, and when I got out they ran it for an audience of wheels from Fox. I saw these goddamned cigar-smoke dissolves, which I had never seen before, and I said, "Are you all *kidding?"* They said, "Oh, it's just temporary, Nick, just temporary." You can see how temporary they were.

I made the film as a favor to Buddy Adler, who had just become head of the studio. He said that what all the exhibitors wanted was a Jesse James movie. I said, "Buddy, I'm not going to do any remakes for Chrissake. If you ask me, I'll do it — but will you do it *my* way?" He said sure. I said, "OK, I want to do it as a ballad, all on a stage, even the horses, in areas of light. No exteriors. I want it to be the story of displaced youth after a war." He said OK, but the art department couldn't handle it. Nevertheless, it has some nice things in it.

Like Run For Cover, *it seems to lack that special Nick Ray tension.*

The True Story of Jesse James

BITTER VICTORY [COLUMBIA, 1957]

The Libyan desert, 1942. Richard Burton and Curt Jurgens are British officers, leading a commando raid to steal secret papers from Rommel's HQ. There is no love lost between them: Not only does Burton hold Jurgens in contempt for the latter's cowardice, but Jurgens is aware that his young wife, Ruth Roman, is strongly attracted to Burton. After successfully executing the raid, the band's escape is complicated not only by Jurgens' continuing cowardice, but by his attempts to do away with Burton. After an unsuccessful attempt to leave Burton behind in the desert, Jurgens finally succeeds by failing to warn Burton that a scorpion is crawling up his leg. Burton dies, but as he does so he saves Jurgens' life — preventing him from wandering off to his death in a sudden sandstorm. In the confusion, a captured Nazi burns the vital papers. The mission a complete failure, Jurgens is nonetheless awarded a medal; he pins it on the breast of a bayonet-practice dummy.

The war itself is little more than a background for Ray's drama of character. Burton gives an extraordinary performance as a cynical, embittered intellectual who has abandoned his archeological studies (and his sweetheart) to volunteer for military duty. He has no patriotic illusions about war; one feels that he embraces its horrors only out of masochism — his desire to deal with a thankless universe in its purest form. Even his battle courage arises from nihilism, and his taunting conversations with Jurgens amount to suicide by proxy; he leaves Jurgens no choice but to kill him. If his motivation for saving Jurgens' life is paradoxical, it is only one aspect of a larger question that Ray never answers: the riddle of Burton's self-destructive anguish.

"Never before have the characters in a film seemed so close and yet so far away. For *Bitter Victory* is not a reflection of life, it is life turned into a film, seen from behind the mirror where cinema intercepts it. It is at once the most direct and the most secret of films, the most subtle and the crudest. It is not cinema, it is more than cinema . . . *Bitter Victory*, like the sun, makes you close your eyes. Truth is blinding."

Jean-Luc Godard, Cahiers du Cinéma

Bitter Victory *is an unusual film for Hollywood.*

Ray: It wasn't a Hollywood film in certain senses. It was financed by a Hollywood company, but the producer was a Frenchman. Columbia cut about 20 minutes out of the film. They cut the part where we discover that, like Field Marshall Montgomery, the officer in the film has a drawer full of medals that he gives to the survivors of dangerous expeditions — pretending they're his personal medals. And they cut Ruth Roman's apprehension as to who was returning — her wanting Burton to return and not her husband. In London, they even cut the pinning of the cross on the dummy.

Are there cuts in the sequences where Burton is left behind in the desert? Later, he gets angry at Jurgens, apparently for something that happens right there, but I've never been sure exactly what it is.

Ray: Jurgens pulls out all the supporting troops, so if Burton is attacked it'll be two against an army. Everything that Jurgens does is a contrivance for using his authority to vent his jealousy. During that sequence when the two dying soldiers are lying there, and beetles are crawling over them, I wrote two things for Burton. One was a silent monologue, in relation to making the decision to kill or not to kill, to mercy kill or not to mercy kill. I wrote it as if I were writing the best of Shakespeare. And to relieve himself of that I wanted a flashback into a lyric lake scene between Burton and Ruth Roman. But this was called daydreaming, and daydreaming was not considered to be reality. I think it's as much reality as having coffee for breakfast.

In a way, I'm surprised that they released it at all.

Ray: They did their best to bury it. After World War II it was the first combined anti-hero, anti-war film.

Burton is tremendous. The scene where he carries the wounded soldier on his shoulder . . .

Ray: He has the same attitude he had in the stone city, when he says, "Tenth Century Berber, it's a little too modern for me." And later he says, "I kill the living and save the dead." The producers thought I was loading it too heavily against Jurgens. I don't think so at all. Jurgens is the same kind of unmitigated heel that Mercedes McCambridge was in *Johnny Guitar*.

WIND ACROSS THE EVERGLADES [WARNERS, 1958]

Christopher Plummer, a hard-drinking schoolteacher, arrives in turn-of-the-century Miami and promptly gets into a street brawl. When the schoolboard head, who has witnessed the fight, removes Plummer from his teaching position, he takes a job as bird warden for the Audubon Society. His job is to stop a band of outlaws, headed by Burl Ives, from killing birds for their plummage. After several inconclusive encounters between the warden and the outlaw, Plummer sets out for a final confrontation with Ives deep in the Everglades. Following an all-night drinking contest (which ends in a draw), Ives agrees to stand trial in Miami if Plummer can get him there without help. They set out for civilization, but Plummer loses his way in the swamp. During a moment of confusion Ives clubs Plummer with an oar, and then drags him to safety on a hummock. In the process, Ives is bitten by a poisonous snake and dies. Plummer returns to Miami alone.

A thoroughly subversive film, Everglades begins as a delightful period adventure only to metamorphose into strange, deeply-felt psychodrama. In the first half of the film, a familiar good guy-bad guy dialectic pits Plummer, a civilized man of conscience, against Ives, a socially-irresponsible primitive. Yet despite Ives' plot function as the villain, his bubbling vitality and intimate relationship with nature make him a positive figure. One feels an increasing tension between Ives-as-written and Ives-as-directed, as if Ray were struggling in vain against his own sympathy for the character. Finally, as the film moves into its second half, set against swampy vistas of green trees, watery shallows and flights of shrieking birds, Ives takes over the film completely. At the same time, the film's ostensible "conservation" theme is subsumed in the primitive man-to-man struggle between the Audubon warden and the outlaw.

Wind across the Everglades

One can't help suspecting that the struggle between reason and anarchy that lies at the film's heart is Ray's struggle too. Drawn simultaneously toward both of his characters, he seems to have given some of himself to each of them. The similarities between Plummer and Ives — both are rebels, both are socially alienated, both live by an inner code of honor — further suggest their common origin in Ray's own uneasy conscience.

As the film moves toward its conclusion, it becomes clear that we are witnessing not a struggle for supremacy, but a struggle for wholeness. Only by coming together can Plummer and Ives make a whole man, and that man is Nick Ray.

Yet this joyous communion is denied us. In the bitter finale nature consumes itself — Ives dies from the bite of his own totem animal, the snake — and civilization triumphs by default. It is a pyrrhic victory, for Plummer — alienated from the shallow Miami society and incompetent in the wilds of the Glades — must find his way alone, forever denied of Ives' natural power.

Plummer is pretty good, but I have the feeling that he never gets a solid grasp on the character.

Ray: Well, it was his first film. And it's a hard character to get hold of, because they decided to cut out what I considered the first obligatory scene — Plummer's arrest in Boston for drunkenness. That scene was always very important to me, but Schulberg cut it out for some reason.

Also, Burl Ives tends to blow Plummer away.

Ray: Yeah, but that's interesting. Especially Ives' capitulation at the end.

There isn't really any motivation for that, as far as plot goes.

Ray: There was Ives' appreciation of a *man*. Another scene they cut: I had improvised a scene after the Fourth of July celebration on the beach. Plummer and Chana Eden try to make love under the bandstand, and run back into town. And they come across Burl, carrying his son to a doctor — which he's able to do because everybody has left town, and he's safe. When the two of them meet on the street, silently, they appreciate each other's desire for aloneness and walk in opposite directions. It was a beautiful scene, and why the hell they cut it I'll never . . . Maybe because Bud hadn't written it.

One of the interesting things is how the center shifts. First you think that Plummer is gonna be the center, but it ends up being Burl Ives.

Ray: My prejudice is in favor of gangsters anyway.

Ives is a very attractive gangster. That outrageous tip-off line, where the "professor" says that Ives represents the freedom of the individual carried to its logical conclusion.

Ray: Burl and I have been in more street fights, I guess, than any other two guys I know. He's a great street fighter, He'd come to work sometimes singing these pear-toned songs — "Twelve Days of Christmas," sweet ballads — with blood on his shirt from the last fight.

How did you like working with Schulberg?

Ray: Bud really wanted to direct the film himself — I heard him say that one night. And I found it very difficult to relate to him. I knew Kazan had gotten along with him very well, so I called Gadge and said, "Goddammit, I'm getting two soggy pages a day written by his ghostwriter. What the hell can I do?" Kazan gave me some advice, and I stuck it out. Schulberg refused to allow a range of respect among men. The trial scene was very awkward to work with.

The drinking contest is a fine sequence. The sound of the jug sliding acorss the table, the weight of it . . .

Ray: There were people there who thought the same organic language that I do. All the stuff between Peter Falk and Curt Conway in that scene was improvised. It was Falk's first film. Nobody would give him a job because his eyes were crossed.

It's one of my favourite films. There's so much vitality, life force . . .

Ray: A very anarchistic movie. I love the scene in the mud, where they're all fighting. Emmett Kelly is in the background, shadowboxing.

PARTY GIRL [MGM, 1958]

Chicago in the '30s. Robert Taylor, the brilliant, charming attorney for gangster Lee J. Cobb, meets dancer and "party girl" (read prostitute) Cyd Charisse. They fall in love, and Taylor decides to defy Cobb and start a legitimate law practice. When a gang war breaks out, Taylor is jailed as a material witness, and Cobb kidnaps Charisse to make sure Taylor won't talk. Taylor arranges to be released from jail, and is promptly kidnapped too. Just as Cobb is about to attack his two prisoners with acid, the police arrive and apprehend the gang. (cont'd p.18)

Executed with bravura flair and cinematic grace, *Party Girl* has the inner coherence and sureness of touch of a classic genre film. When it was released in 1958, the *New York Times* criticized Ray for "approaching his subject as if the explosive Chicago of the Thirties was something he had just discovered," but this quality of freshness and discovery is, in fact, one of the film's delights.

Although its audacity and sense of adventure suggest a "first film," the masterly skill with which Ray has constructed *Party Girl* can be seen in the ease with which he slides two full-scale dance numbers into what is essentially a gangster movie. The musical numbers are completely off-the-wall; yet they work so splendidly, one comes to recognize their significance as exemplars of a basic and characteristic mechanism in the American cinema; the outrageous juxtaposition of conflicting elements, integrated through the mediation of a great filmmaker's vision. One can practically hear the producer: "We're paying for Cyd Charisse; get in a couple of production numbers!" Faced with the necessity of including the numbers, Ray places them so perfectly in the fabric of the film that they strengthen it.

Thematically, it seems worth noting that *both* main characters are prostitutes who have sold out their integrity for the lucrative rewards of the big-time, big-money establishment. In fact, the compromised attorney is physically, as well as morally crippled until an operation corrects his twisted hip — at the same time as he decides to break with the mobsters.

In addition, as in so many of Ray's films, the "happy end" is completely unsupported by the plot; one replaces it, almost automatically, with the logical ending wherein Taylor and Charisse are tortured and killed for daring to act in accordance with their ethical awakening.

Party Girl *is one of* Cahiers' *particular favorites. Why do you suppose the French critics love the film so extravagantly?*

Ray: Well, it was kind of baroque. They liked the use of color. The first prints were beautiful. Whenever John Ireland entered a room I put on a green overcast, and dressed him in green. I was experimenting with color. Like, the red-on-red in *Rebel* is entirely different in response from the red-on-red in *Party Girl*, where Cyd Charisse takes off her coat and lies down in the red gown on the red couch. And by this time I was Mr. CinemaScope in France. There's a 14-page essay in *Cahiers* on the film — an extraordinary piece of writing.

It strikes me as a quintessentially Hollywood film, exploiting all the things that Hollywood films do best. A perfect genre film, on one level, and yet thoroughly outrageous.

Ray: The shocking reason that Metro did the film at all was that they wanted to get rid of the overhead of having stars on their payroll 40 weeks a year. By getting Cyd Charisse and Bob Taylor off the payroll, they were making money even before the film was started. Bob Taylor worked like a true method actor. I took him to the greatest bone specialist in southern California, and we spent hours going over hip dislocations, and what would cause that kind of limp. It was strictly a method approach.

One gets the feeling from watching the film that you felt utterly in control, that you would have done anything and it would have worked.

Ray: I *felt* that way, but it wasn't true. I had to work like hell to get the montage of the killings. A few of them were incidents I had experienced. I felt very secure, in that sense — in terms of the Chicago atmosphere of the period. I lived there.

I'm satisfied with the film in the sense that I don't think I could have done much more with it. Except for one thing, that I regret very much. I wanted one scene between Lee Cobb and Cyd Charisse; I wanted to *prove* that Cyd Charisse could act. But they wouldn't let me vary from the script. It was handed to me.

THE SAVAGE INNOCENTS [PARAMOUNT, 1960]

Quinn the Eskimo (whose name is actually Inuk) lives hundreds of miles from civilization. Most of the film's first half is pure anthropology with a thin veneer of plot. The second half begins when Quinn and his wife make a long trek to the south in order to trade fox skins for a rifle. At the trading post they come into contact with a missionary, who is accidentally killed. Quinn and his family flee, followed by two Canadian troopers. Attempting to bring the Eskimo south for trial, one of the troopers freezes to death; Quinn saves the other one. Upon his recovery, the trooper offers to let Quinn go, certain that a trial would result in imprisonment or death. When Quinn refuses, the trooper insults him and runs off. Quinn and his family, baffled by the behaviour of the white men, return to safety in the frozen wilderness.

The Savage Innocents is a serious, responsible attempt to deal with important anthropological and ecological issues; it takes its stand strongly with the Eskimos. Never before in an American film has the white man's civilization been shown with such unremitting hatred and contempt. It doesn't require much stretch of imagination to read Ray for Quinn, and Hollywood for the horrible trading post where the Eskimo will lose his freedom forever.

Once again, the happy ending is spurious. There is no reason to expect the trooper, who's completely insensitive to the cultural interface at the film's heart, to do anything less than his job: Bring that gook to trial! It should come as no surprise, by this time, if we note that in the anguished world of Nicholas Ray, innocents — savage or otherwise — are doomed.

I always think of The Savage Innocents *as "Quinn the Eskimo," on account of Dylan's song. Do you think he wrote it about the film?*

Ray: He did.

The film is anthropologically coherent, which is a real novelty for a Hollywood film. Did you do extensive research?

Ray: Tremendous. I took more from the Archives of Copenhagen and a book by Peter Freuchen than I did from the novel.

Even the language seems right — the syntax, the impersonal pronouns —

Ray: No, that was wrong. That's where I fucked up. I couldn't find an Eskimo actress, and I was convinced of the theory that certain tribes migrated north-eastward into China, crossed the Bering Straits and travelled down through North America — it makes for a great deal of similarity between oriental peoples and Eskimos.

And dig this, parkas are cut on a bias, a slant, like Mandarin coats! Anyway, I cast a Japanese girl, Yoko Tani, and a Chinese girl for her sister. I had written all the Eskimo dialogue in beautiful, fluent, poetic language, and I thought that Yoko would be able to read it without accent. But when they began playing, Quinn found that he couldn't adjust to Yoko's rhythm without using pidgin English. I should have recast, or at least determined to dub. But I made concessions to the pidgin English.

But the use of "one" for "I" . . .

Ray: That's consistent with Eskimo. I've tried to trap Eskimo stewardesses on Canadian airlines into saying, "I," and I've never been able to.

I wanted to ask about the mattes. Like the polar bear is almost always matted. How come?

Ray: We went to a hibernation point to photograph polar bears as they came out of hibernation, when they're the most ferocious. I had an Eskimo standing by me with a Winchester, in case they attacked. We got great footage, tremendous footage; we spent three weeks there. But on takeoff, the landing gear on the Beechcraft wasn't up in time. We hit a small ice heap, couldn't get elevation, hit another ice heap, a *third* ice heap, and belly-crashed. We jumped out of the plane, ran a hundred yards, and the plane blew up with all our footage.

So when I got to England, I had to find some polar bears. There was a circus playing in Belfast, but the owner, a guy named Chipperfield, was a real tough, mean son-of-a-bitch. I was walking with him, and we came to an alligator pit. "Your alligators are pretty sluggish," I said. "Do you mind if I pick one up?" He said, "Well, you can try it." I took his cane, went over

and pressed the back of the alligator's head in the right place, grabbed the tail and picked him up.

This impressed Chipperfield a lot. I had had to learn how to handle alligators during *Wind Across the Everglades*, because my crew was from New York and they were gonna piss in their pants if they saw an alligator. One time I had an alligator in my closet until I could get a box built for him. Anyway, Chipperfield said, "OK, I'll rent you a couple of polar bears. Matter of fact, why don't you take all five? It'll save me the food bill. And by the way, can you get me any fresh alligators?"

We shot the bears against blue backing, but the polar bear being attacked by the dogs was a location shot; as was the polar bear in the water.

The last shot of O'Toole with the town in the background is a matte too.

Ray: Yeah. I changed the script. I had written a third act which took place in the courtroom, but I fell in love with the arctic so much that I just kept going.

Why didn't you just back-project? The mattes are very sophisticated, but you can still see that shimmery outline.

Ray: Blue backing was the new thing then, and it was Walt Disney who talked me into it. Using sodium lights against the blue. Some of the prints don't have that halo, some do. Even so, I had to use remote-controlled cameras. The polar bear is a real . . . the white panther. And, oh! They move so fast! They move!

Did you have problems with people freezing?

Ray: No, only the cameras froze up. I had tested the cameras at 70 below, and they functioned; I learned later that it's the wind that's the determining factor. On days when it was only 10 or 20 below zero, if there was a wind we couldn't shoot. But I shot at 52 and 55 below zero with no discomfort whatsoever. I had only one uncomfortable day of shooting, and that was my own fault because I hadn't put on any heavy underwear. Some days I'd just wear a Seminole jacket.

Did Innocents *make money?*

Ray: I think it must be in the black, but you never can tell. The bookkeeping of American major studios is the most sophisticated form of stealing in the world. I know that *Savage Innocents* made a lot of money because the producer told me he was in the black after six months. Usually it takes 18 months.

Uh, now comes the sad part. What happened with 55 Days?

Ray: *55 Days* epitomized the worst of Hollywood, and it was done by an independent producer who managed to deceive, steal, cheat . . . and bring all the worst aspects of Hollywood into a film being shot in Spain. It's a very painful film for me to talk about. I woke up, one night, and said to my wife, "Something has come to me in the night, and told me that if I do this film I will never make another film."

55 DAYS AT PEKING [VALORIA, 1963]

The pressure was tremendous. On a $6 million production, I had no production manager, and a 21-year-old assistant director. No script. I had two artists in my office, one Chinese and one Spanish. I'd describe the scene to them, they'd draw it and then I'd give it to the so-called writers and say, "Write a scene around this?"

How did you manage to get involved in such a farce?

Ray: I made the mistake common to the journalist who says to his wife, "Darling, I've just had an offer from an advertising agency to become their chief writer for commercials. It'll bring me $200,000 a year, and that will give me the chance to move to Connecticut and write the Great American Novel." This gave me a lot more than $200,000, and I thought, "All right, for the last time I'll break my promise to myself never to do anything I don't want to do."

Were you offered projects thereafter?

Ray: Oh, yeah. Nothing I was interested in, though. I decided I was not going to go back to Hollywood. I had had my suitcase packed for eight years. The lack of adventure in Hollywood filmmaking was getting to me. All I heard about was the diversification of companies, the forecasts of conglomerates. Nothing about the creation of films. Sure, I had made my best films there, but . . .

DRIFTING

I wanted to do my own things. I bought material — Dylan Thomas' *The Doctor and the Devils, Only Lovers Left Alive* . . . I bought a book by a Polish writer called *Next Stop Paradise*, only to discover that he had already sold the rights. I began working on an adaptation of Ibsen's *Lady From the Sea* for Ingrid Bergman and Larry Olivier.

You were living in Europe?

Ray: Yes, off and on from '57 to '69.

What brought you back?

Ray: A film with a court background to it. When I landed here, I asked the producers where the most interesting court action was taking place. They said, "Chicago, the Conspiracy trial." I said, "That's where I want to go, to brush up, to see if there have been any changes in the courts."

The Savage Innocents

Ray: I went to Chicago, became acquainted with the attorneys and the defendants, watched the courtroom proceedings. After three or four days I went back to New York with the producers, and before I'd been on the ground three hours, I said, "What the fuck am I doing here? *That's* where it is, back in Chicago. What the hell are we doing with *this* script? That's where the story is, Chicago!" They didn't agree with me. I had the privilege of a $30,000 overdraft at my bank, which I exercised. I took whatever money I had left, went back to Chicago and started shooting.

CHICAGO CONSPIRACY MOVIE [NEVER COMPLETED]

We couldn't get cameras into the court — I tried a couple of times, but they made too much noise — so we shot everything that happened outside the courtroom. I sent camera crews with the guys when they were speaking at news conferences, doing karate exercises . . . We shot 30,000 feet of film, and 540 hours of tape which I bribed from an official of the court. The tape was delivered to me by a lieutenant in Chicago's finest, delivered to me like a gangster, off an alley, from under his leather jacket. I still have the footage; some of it's in *We Can't Go Home Again*.

What happened to the movie? Why didn't you finish it?

Ray: The three great pornographers of the United States — Grove Press, Michael Butler and Hugh Hefner — backed out.

What did you do?

Ray: I lost an eye. An embolism. At three o'clock in the morning, I found out that we had no backing, sent my staff home, and fell asleep at the editing table. I woke up and my eye was kind of heavy. It got worse. It took me six hours to find a doctor, and if I had made it 20 minutes sooner, they would have been able to inject nicotinic acid and save the eye.

Christ! Well, what did you do then?

Ray: We continued. We continued working. I've never stopped working. People in New York helped me, worked with me . . .

Underground?

Ray: I don't know what the fuck that means. Why use the word "underground"? It's a cheap word, it gives distinction to bad films being made by inept people!

I meant it as working outside Hollywood structure.

Ray: Well, it's taken on a different connotation.

WE CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN [UNCOMPLETED]

The action in *We Can't Go Home Again* centers around an elderly film teacher at a small college, and a group of his students. Half psychodrama, half staged fiction, the film is constructed from a series of raw encounters: sexual, inter-personal, political. The teacher, played by Nick Ray, is accused of being a "betrayer" — a role he seems to accept. Deeply alienated — as are all the characters in the film — he attempts to hang himself, changes his mind, and stumbles into the noose by accident. His students discover him swinging, choking but still alive, and leave him to die.

Shot variously in 8, Super-8, 16, 17.5 and 35mm, the film erupts on the screen as a simultaneous barrage of images — some concrete, some abstract, some indeterminate. Documentary footage from the Chicago Conspiracy trial and other political street action is intercut with the "fictional" material.

The film reflects a basic ambivalence toward the young people in it: they are romanticized, particularly in terms of their politics and lifestyle, and yet they are presented with a certain contempt. As might be expected, they are cast as the "innocents" with which Ray has concerned himself ever since *They Live By Night*. Yet *these* innocents are, in some sinister way, poisoned. Self-indulgent to the point of pain, cruel and arbitrary, decadent, desperate and selfish — these children of the '70s are a universe apart from Keechie and Bowie, the lovers of *They Live By Night*.

The one character in *We Can't Go Home Again* who is viewed unambiguously is Nick Ray — a deeply confused man, seeking for something he has lost, something he needs desperately. Exactly what it is — a sense of purpose, a sense of faith, a sense of sense itself — is never made clear. When, hanging from the rope, he groans, "I have been interrupted," the man's pain is nearly unbearable. Although the line's specific referrent is unclear, its meaning is unmistakeable.

When did you start teaching film at Harpur College?

Ray: December, '71. I loved the kids there, and I was sure as hell going to get them off their asses — not lecture to them. I was going to concentrate on my experiments with color.

How did this particular film come into existence?

Ray: Just out of realizing that we were touching the texture of life. We had been shooting ad-lib, and acting out the things the students had confidence enough to bring in to me. One day it seemed to me that we had the potential for a film.

Was a conscious decision made on the characters and plot?

Ray: There's no plot.

There seems to be one.

Ray: Yeah, there seems to be one in *Rebel*, too, but then isn't *Rebel* is the story of a guy who wants to have 24 hours which are not confused. Everything else is character.

This is the first time you play a major acting role in a film, isn't it?

Ray: Yeah, I play the part of a betrayer — typical of my generation. It comes out of a sense of guilt. My generation has been the biggest betrayers of any generation we've ever known. The betrayals that I engage in (in the movie) are like asking your kid to jump into your arms and then pulling your arms away. the kind of betrayals that lie behind the wars, the assassinations, the Watergates.

The film is something of a technical departure for you, in that it's mostly multiple-image.

Ray: It's a departure in filmmaking. It rests on the concept that a celluloid strip recognizes neither time nor space — only the limits of man's imagination.

One of the striking things about We Can't Go Home Again *is that despite the sex and nudity, it's so damned unsensational.*

Ray: Maybe Lillian Hellman would have had a scene with a girl who's going to masturbate in front of a window for a department store owner, but that it should be *true* is too bizarre. That's what's so wrong with most Hollywood films — they make them into plastic all-weather paint, slapped on the side of the house. That way they think they'll endure — but damn few do.

Where did the money for the film come from?

Ray: From me, mostly. The National Committee for the Endowment of the Arts gave me a $20,000 grant, but the University fucked it up by making an application at the same time. So they compromised, and gave the money to the Harpur Research Foundation, which would administer it through Nick Ray. In this way I had to start digging into my own pocket — which never stopped. Every penny I earned, or had, or could borrow has gone into this film.

Are you satisfied with the film technically?

Ray: Yeah, for having done it with very primitive equipment and very limited funds. It's all students and myself: student camerawork, grip work, gaffers, everything. I did a much more sophisticated version of multiple-image seven years ago, in Czechoslovakia. But this'll do for a start.

TRUE/FALSE

We have sort of a hasty last minute surprise, a True-False Quiz. To start with, we think that in many, if not all, of your most interesting films the leading actor portrays Nick Ray — Dean as a rebel, Burton as a cynical, self-destructive intellectual, Mason as a potential psychotic, Taylor as a charming prostitute. True or false?

Ray: True. I never thought of it before, but you could say the same of *In A Lonely Place* and *They Live By Night*.

Even Vienna, in Johnny Guitar, *is playing Nick Ray.*

Ray: Partly true. But only in the sense of a line I wrote for Ernie Borgnine. Scott Brady says to him, "Who do you like, Bart, who do you like?" and Ernie says, "Me, I like me."

Your characters are all, in some way, "bigger than life" — stronger, stranger, brighter, more neurotic . . .

Ray: How do you separate that?

You mean intelligence and neurosis?

Ray: Yes, how do you separate those? Why do you ask that kind of question? We are all products of our own intuition. Intelligence . . . I think I had one of the highest in school, but I got kicked out of school more times than anybody else before or since. I don't handle my life with intelligence. I don't know many people who do. Maybe a few gangsters, like Presidents and so on.

In the earliest films, the Nick Ray characters are defeated by social circumstances, whereas later on they defeat themselves — they commit suicide, one way or another, by putting themselves into impossible situations.

Ray: True. But it is the role of the poet or the artist — and every artist hopes to be a poet — to expose himself. It's the only way he communicates. Any line of poetry, I don't care if it's rock, acid rock, old man jazz . . . Oh my God, I said "true." What was the question again?

[*We repeat the question.*]

Ray: No. It's not true of *They Live By Night, Rebel, Johnny Guitar, In A Lonely Place.* I don't think it's true of most of my films. My obligation as a showman, and a person of the theater, rests within an essay by Romain Roland called *The People's Theater:* "The obligation of the worker in the theater is to give the audience a heightened sense of being." Suicide doesn't do that.

But in all those movies the characters, by their refusal to compromise, put themselves up against absolutely impossible odds.

Ray: That's our society.

We turned off the tape recorder. Nick drained his wine glass, picked up his knapsack and started to leave. Then, with a shy smile, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out . . . a hand-puppet! It was a soft, fuzzy little lion, and Nick slipped it over his hand. Coming alive, the lion caressed Nick's cheek like a sweet-tempered kitten. "This is my friend," said Nick. "He loves me." Suddenly the lion puppet swung at him. Nick ducked. The lion swung again, missed again.

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Three years can mean the end of a world, or the beginning of one. The preceding interview was done in 1974, when it seemed extremely unlikely Nick Ray would ever make another commercial film.

As you probably know, a new Ray film is in production. It stars (ahem) Rip Torn, Norman Mailer and Marilyn Chambers. Not bad for a washed-out has-been director.

When we first heard about it, we were tempted to "update" the interview. But history shouldn't be rewritten, and even three short years is a respectable hunk of history. The time we spent with Nick Ray was an important time for us, and we'll not falsify it now merely to polish our prescience. Think of it as a chapter — and thank God it's not the last. Welcome back, Nick!

Latest flash

Project for a film; 1976-1977.
Working title: **City Blues.**
Color, 35mm, Panascope.
Cast: Rip Torn, Marilyn Chambers.
Director: Nicholas Ray.
From the novel, *The Last Free Man.*
Financing: Originally structured as a tax shelter. Changes in the US law necessitated new arrangements. Presently a venture capital operation.
Budget: Over $1 million dollars.
Ray: "I read the script, vomitted, then the next morning sat down and rewrote it in the four days immediately afterwards."

November, 1976: A New Yorker for the past few years, Nick Ray, along with Susan Schwartz, has just taken a loft on Spring Street, not far from the principal locations which have been selected for **City Blues**, a film of and in New York City.

Ray has discarded his eye patch, stopped drinking as of last summer, and while the film is being re-financed, has busied himself with several other projects, including the completion of a new screenplay written in conjunction with Victor Perkins, the British critic. He has begun to compile some of his other filmscripts for publication, and is discussing offering a small masters class, "Acting and Directing for the Cinema," in New York this winter.

"All his films are crossed by the same obsession with twilight, the solitude of beings, the difficulty of human relations." — *Jacques Rivette*

Ray moves through the city, the famous brooding presence ever intact, ever private.

Marilyn Chambers

Marilyn's story

Marilyn Chambers was recently in Montreal, on location for Cinepix. Take One spoke to her husband and manager, Chuck Traynor, about her involvement in Nick Ray's projected film, **City Blues.**

He told us that Marilyn had been signed to play the lead, and had been promised $60,000 and 5% of the gross. On signing, she received $10,000. Unfortunately, during the summer the US tax shelter laws were changed, and the existing financing fell through. (Under the old law, an investor could write off four times the amount of his investment over a two- to three-year period. The new legislation prevents any write-off of more than the amount invested.)

Ms. Chambers is no longer under contract for **City Blues**, but is still very interested in the project. If enough new money is raised, and if she is available when shooting begins, she'll be in the film.

According to Traynor, Norman Mailer, who had done some script re-writing, would also be involved in any future revival of the venture, as would Rip Torn (if available). Traynor stressed that **City Blues** had been a viable, well-financed project, and that Ray had attacked it with a tremendous amount of vigour.