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Magnificent Failure

BY JOHN J. FRITSCHER

NEAR seven years his name has lived on three short years of limelit life. Valentino could not die and Byron will be seen forever at Missolonghi. Yet in the ruins of abrupt tragedy, when his searching was not ended, there was frozen in last season's generation the memory of the sweet lost pains of adolescence and the old times that are forever gone.

In September, 1955, when James Dean sped to his death in California's fertile Salinas Valley, Warner Bros. calculated and shook its collective head at the loss. The first crush of mail was indignant, almost hysterically resentful, piqued with premature death. Then the letters slowed to a trickle and Hollywood recognized the chilling calm that leads to obscurity. Yet in December there was a surprising increase; January delivered 3000 letters; and by summer, 1956, the studio was averaging 7000 letters a month with payment enclosed for photographs of James Byron Dean.

The for-once-amazed press agency was stymied by the gratuitous flood of mail. From mouth to mouth spread the personal commitment to his memory, the adulation, the rumors. Through the high schools and junior colleges of the nation the secret whispered that Jimmy Dean was not dead, that he was horribly disfigured, temporarily insane, hidden away. The public demanded the whole truth about the young actor who lived and died almost between the blinks of a weary world's eye.

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From city to city vulgar stage shows promised the ectoplasmic return of James Dean in person, on stage. A sculptured head sold out nationally at thirty dollars a likeness. Magazines entirely devoted to Dean vended hundreds of thousands of copies. His two released motion pictures were requested and rebooked across the country. Columbia Records pressed an extended play album of tortured painful music from the soundtracks of his pictures. A Forest record entitled *His Name Was Dean* sold 25,000 copies the first week of release.

What had begun spontaneously was perverted by calculation. The money changers were marching through hysteria.

Warner Bros., rolling with the punches, decided to hold the last Dean movie in reserve with release postponed "out of respect for a fine actor's memory." It was a gamble, shelving momentarily Edna Ferber's *Giant*, holding back the completed performances of big-box-office Elizabeth Taylor and Rock Hudson; but it was also an ace in the hole. Everyone knew Jimmy Dean had completed his last scene as Jett Rink only three days before his death.

Fourteen months after the accident, with excitement at a fever pitch, Warners released director George Stevens' *Giant* which in the ensuing weeks won seven major Academy Award nominations, not the least meaningful of which was the posthumous nomination given James Dean for the best performance by an actor. With full integrity, but wounding loyalists hearts, Yul Brynner went on to win that coveted 1956 Oscar for his performance in *The King and I*. It had been Dean's last chance.

Against the glutted background of such neon ballyhoo, it is easy to miss the personality of the twenty-four-year-old youth who, unknowing, toyed psychologically with the emotions of a generation. James Dean was a magnificent failure.

Tragedy stalked Dean's life and the shadows were always with him, driving him, tormenting him. "My mother died on me when I was nine years old," he cried melodramatically in a studio tantrum. "What does she expect me to do? Do it all by myself?"

From childhood he blamed himself for Mildred Dean's death by cancer and in blaming himself alternately loved and hated her the more for the pain he remembered in her face, for her enervating abandonment of him.

There was nothing in his life with his Uncle Marcus and Aunt Ortense to explain the moodiness, the brooding among the coffins in the Fairmont, Indiana, general store. His environment had been normal enough, adjustable; but Mildred had dreamed great unfulfilled dreams for herself and when they had not worked for her, perhaps they would work for Jimmy. They had to; they must.

James Byron Dean. The James was plain for Indiana; but the Byron was for Mildred. In Fairmont, there was no time for himself, troubled among the constant ghosts of his mother, plotting ways to repay her for dying. Existentially he did not know who he was or what he was, crippled, force-molded by the hope and wild dreams of his farm-girl mother.

The years in Indiana, portending no future, James Dean went to California, in 1950, to see his father; but the myths are tangled with the truth. Few knew him well; none knew him long. The devotees of such things can relate what stations there are.

In audition, the discerning Elia Kazan saw in the turbulent young student from U.C.L.A. the deep feeling and raw communication that translates a particular actor into portrayal. Dean won the role of Steinbeck's tortured Cal Trask in *East of Eden*. The critics acclaimed his performance precisely because over the crags of tragedy the portrayal came to grips with truly human, problems, something Jimmy Dean could not manage in real life.

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Now he was on the way—with the gnawing emptiness still there. He received excellent reviews in the Broadway play *See the Jaguar*, but the show itself closed within a week. Yet a niche seemed to be opening for his life. “Acting,” he said, “is the greatest. Every town has its successful lawyers, but how many successful actors has it got? The first time I found out acting was as big a challenge as law, I flipped.”

But the twenty-two-year-old actor could not reverse the equation. He gave life to characters in scripts, but the celluloid solutions gave him no peace in return. The title of his second picture, *Rebel Without a Cause*, fitted him well. Tormented genius? Angry man? Sullen, ill-tempered, snapping back at the acclaim given his artistry, he was despite the euphemisms of the magazines, an emotionally stunted misfit.

About his life there was nothing pretty. He did not drink, but he smoked too much, slept too little, drove too fast. He was running at a pace that would not let him see where he had been or where he was going. It was tragic when his \$7000 Porsche Spyder plowed into a Ford driven by a Salinas farmer. Mildred Dean had always wanted to protect him from farmers.

Any psychologist can explain idolization. Cult is a question of identity and in the case of James Dean adolescence found its Self, its personification.

Always emotionally immature, he was the heroic example of rebellion to adolescents experiencing normal emotional disturbances at the proper age. He rebelled against conformity and he not only got away with it, he got rich at it.

And there was insurance. He was solid. He was dead. His cycle was complete. There was no danger that once the investment of identification had been made he would desert his promises and fly to the adult society that youth imagines so callously wanting.

Identification enables one to regain an object that has been lost; in identifying with a loved person who has died or from whom one has been separated, the lost person's expressiveness becomes reincarnated as an incorporated feature of one's personality.

James Dean was dead; he had this appeal of lost tragedy and it found complimentary expression in the varying degrees of sympathetic imitation characteristic of his pre-school followers. They subconsciously resolved he had not died in vain. A little of his struggle, a little of him, was living in them.

Everyone knew, even in the furor of 1956, that he had been hardly better than he should have been, that his inappropriate aggressiveness had repelled all but two close friends; but few paid ardent attention to his personal life. What had had important influence, what had been seen by millions, was the film image he had projected.

Sympathy was given him in *East of Eden*; identification with him was made in the searching nobility of *Rebel Without a Cause*; and the laurels of emotive versatility were paid him for *Giant*. Whatever James Dean was as a person, as an actor he was an artist eliciting an artist's due.

In the face of young legends, the phenomenon of James Dean has paled slowly and it has paled inevitably. The youngsters of seven years ago have outgrown the need for the expressive example of the boy who could not outgrow the tangles of his maternally plagiarized life; and now these young adults, content like the slowly-aging and little-increasing sets of Garland and Sinatra fans, are not rejecting and forgetting the James Dean of their nonage.

He is recalled with a wistful smile and a dash of pity; for his whole anguished life is a commemorative symbol of unresolved maturity's most temporarily endless period.

Another generation will have another lord; but those who remember like to think this was a little different, that he sparked a minute of truth, that for one brief shining moment when he was needed, James Dean was someone good and someone very special.

The secret of the spontaneity was that despite everything, despite all his personal shortcomings, his lost nobility flickered in empathy with every gangling kid who ever stood alone and aching on the threshold of the world. He seemed to understand the misunderstood.

In 1957, a partially fictionalized biography ended quintessentially: “Do not judge me as James Byron

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Dean. I am the man you dreamed me to be. I am the parts I played throughout my meager yesterdays. I am the young and the lonely and the lost. I will remain a part of every one of you who knew of me.”

Even in life he was more spirit than flesh.

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