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Film Appreciation 1310

24 October 2009

“East of Eden”

East of Eden is a film shot in 1955 and takes place in the Salinas Valley in 1917, around the time of World War I. Caleb ‘Cal’ Trask (James Dean) is looking for love and acceptance from his father, Adam Trask (Raymond Massey) as well as how to relate to his mother. He is competing against his brother, Aron Trask (Richard Davalos) for the same love and acceptance which his brother always seems to easily win. In jealousy, Cal lets Aron learn the truth about his mother, whom he was told was dead. In fact, she lives on the other side of the mountains and is a madam. Aron loses it and heads off to war. This gets Adam all worked up and gives him a stroke, leaving Cal feeling guilty he has hurt (and maybe killed) his father and sent his brother off to war.

The film and the acting were excellent. The film won an Oscar for Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Jo Van Fleet), with another 7 wins and 9 nominations . The film was nominated for the Academy Awards for Best Actor in a Leading Role (James Dean), Best Director (Elia Kazan), and Best Writing (Paul Osborn). The combination of a good story and the acting to support it made this an enjoyable film. The acting required a considerable range of emotion from the actors. Being a drama, there were times of excitement and joy and times of anguish and suffering. The actors had to sell these emotions in a convincing way but not over do it.

For the film to be believable, the actors must become the characters. The Art of Watching Films describes two acting methods. One method is outside-in, “You do the behavior and it starts to seep inside” . The second is inside-out, “You begin with the feeling and memory, and those feelings begin to affect your behavior” . The second method is also called method acting and was developed by Konstantin Stanislavski and advanced by Lee Strasberg . James Dean was a student of Strasberg as well as many other well known actors . The director, Elia Kazan, was a proponent of the method approach and was known to direct method actors . Sean Axmaker, for Turner Classic Movies, notes that others came before James Dean with successful method acting, although it was James Dean “that everyone remembers” because he “brought an entirely new and fresh perspective to it” . Axmaker provides the example of the opening scene were the audience can tell Cal is a boy not entirely comfortable in his own body . “He's never still, constantly fidgeting or shrugging or pacing. He drops his eyes in uncomfortable moments and slips into giggles when conversations become too personal” . The acting, if convincing enough, can give the audience some idea of what the character is thinking. Axmaker says, regarding the scene of Cal stalking Kate, “you can practically hear his mind whirring just by observing his body language” . Watching this film, it was easy to relate to the characters, which helped make the story believable. Their responses and behaviors matched the demands of the scene and story. The close-ups, not available with stage acting, let’s the audience see without any other information, as to what the character is experiencing. This puts an added demand on the film actor to ensure their facial expressions are exact. In East of Eden, there are many close-ups which show responses by the characters and give the audience a view into the character themselves.

This film is interesting to note the casting techniques. The Art of Watching Films notes the star system is used to assume movie goers want to see great personalities versus great stories . In East of Eden, many of the stars selected had previous film experience. Instead, director Kazan had shied away from the Hollywood stars and instead cast actors from the Actor’s Studio . Also, contrasting characters is important, “so they stand out clearly from each other” . For example, Richard Davalos is taller and a thinner build than James Dean. And there is an interesting contrast of Julie Harris, the actress who played Abra, and Raymond Massey, who played the father, Adam. Kazan, describing Julie Harris, said,

“Her face was the most compassionate face of any girl I had ever seen, and I stressed it. I contrasted her face and Massey's, which was a piece of wood.” .

There wasn’t just a contrast in the actors’ physical characteristics, but also in acting styles. Raymond Massey was a veteran traditional actor (he performed in 47 other films before East of Eden). His older acting style contrasted nicely with the newer Method acting style “to help exaggerate the generational conflict” . Also a part of casting is fate. Unknown actors may become stars because the role meant for another actor was turned down. For example, “Montgomery Cliff turned down four roles”, one of which was Cal in East of Eden . The role of Cal helped launch Dean’s career and define his character in Rebel Without a Cause .

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