

Review of the Arts



Photo by Tim Patrick

Nicholas Ray: Played In

Film

Last Wednesday, a tired looking man in a bright red jacket limped off a plane at Mahlon Sweet airport and said to his greeters, "It's good to be here in Portland. You got a decent film lab around here?" Enter Nicholas Ray, filmmaker.

He had been up until 4 a.m. shooting a film in upstate New York, then clutching a scratched work print he raced down state to Kennedy Airport, and caught a plane to the West coast to fulfill a commitment to the University's Cultural Forum to show and talk about some of his films.

In the next couple of days Ray more than carried out his obligation to the Cultural Forum. He showed two films "The Savage Innocents" and "Rebel without a Cause," and previewed a twenty-minute segment of "You Can't Go Home Again," the film he is currently making with his students at Harper College in Binghamton, New York.

After the showing of each film, Ray answered multitudes of questions ranging from "How was it to work with Bogie?" to "Would you change 'Rebel Without a Cause' if you were to remake it today?" If he didn't have other engagements afterward he would have stayed all night rapping to students.

Through all the hassles, Ray displayed the style of a true showman. When he wasn't speaking to a film class or an audience he was partying. The night he arrived in Eugene Bill and Beverly Cadbury threw a gig for him at their home. Following his appearance at Bill Batty's Great Films class and the special screening of "You Can't Go Home Again," a group of film students along with Bill and Linda Batty gave a dinner party for him.

The dinner guests crowded around him like locusts and Ray the showman shone through beautifully. With wine glass in hand, and an unlit filter-tip Gitane jutting from his lips he told story after story and recalled anecdote after anecdote. Ray recounted how during the filming of "Knock On Any Door" Humphrey Bogart, in consternation over Ray's complicated instructions for a scene, came up to him and said, "Nick, I've only got five expressions."

Ray has the habit of thinking before he replies to a question. When he throws back his head, tugs at his eye patch and makes a futile effort to relight his Gitane before making a statement or answering a question, this seems to get to people. At one point when Ray hadn't even finished calling the major film distributors a bunch of "bastards", the guy he was talking to was already on his third question.

By 7:30 p.m. most of the guests had already left for campus to catch "Rebel Without a Cause" at the EMU Ballroom. But Ray wasn't quite ready to leave the festivities yet. In fact, until 8 p.m. it looked like he might not make the film at all. Bill Batty went over to offer explanations and get the film rolling shortly thereafter. Meanwhile, Ray, not quite feeling himself at the time, crashed. Things didn't look good.

But the show must go on. About 9:30 p.m. the giant stirred. He insisted on going through with the job. No "normal" person would have been able to do it. In a moment of true advocacy journalism

this reporter was called on to drive Ray to campus. At this time, however, he didn't say much. He spent most of his time looking for the ash tray. Anyway, he finally made it to the Ballroom. The film hadn't ended yet so he slumped into one of the barber chairs while a standing room only crowd watched the remaining few minutes of his film.

And when the lights went up there was Ray. Standing in front of the stage, microphone in hand, he proceeded to talk to any and all who cared to talk to him until the clean up crew started to lock the place up. In the interim, noting Ray's fatigued appearance a masseur offered his services. But Ray insisted on going back to the party where he had told some persons he would meet them. After an hour's more partying somebody finally talked him into getting some sleep and he left.

Andrew Sarris acknowledges Nicholas Ray as the "cause celebre" of the auteur theory. The auteur theory holds that the director is the maker of a film and essentially the same message or at least subject is dealt with in every film the director makes. Nicholas Ray is not only the "cause celebre" of the auteur theory, he is the personification of auteurism. Meeting this man and seeing one of his films proves this. Ray puts himself into every film he makes. And as the director he is, he accepts responsibility for his films good or bad.

Ray himself doesn't fully accept the auteur theory. He says each film results from the efforts of everyone from a grip to a director. He adds that when making a film he tries to bring everyone together as a family. But Ray readily admits the repetitive treatment of morality in his films and his view that there is no "abstract morality." Each relationship establishes its own morality he explains. He also deals regularly with self-image, particularly among young persons.

Ray, 62, who gives the appearance of being rather burnt-out, hasn't made a film in Hollywood in 10 years. For the past two years he has taught at Harper College. Yet he is definitely a filmmaker of the future. "You Can't Go Home Again" will be shown at this year's Cannes Film Festival, marking the first time a student film has been invited to participate in that event according to Ray.

In this student production everyone takes turns doing the various jobs which need to be done in filmmaking. Because of this Ray refuses to take credit for the film. On one occasion the students overruled his decision to cut himself out of a scene.

Obviously Ray is very interested in student filmmaking. He also sees a great future in student film distribution. An entirely new system of direct distribution to campuses around the country and the world is a reasonable alternative to the present one says Ray. He is bitter about what he refers to as the compromise in content and quality necessary to get a film distributed through a major company. The director also feels a campus distribution system would allow far more films to be made and shown by student artists.

Film, said Ray, is an art. As an art it should be appreciated on a personal level by each individual. When asked by a member of the audience what a particular scene in "Rebel Without a Cause" meant, he replied, "What do you think it meant?"

Nicholas Ray is committed to filmmaking. This commitment brought him to Eugene to present his films. His commitment to theatre and showmanship forced him to meet the Ballroom audience. And commitment is what Nicholas Ray is looking for in young people today. He couldn't find commitment in Hollywood, so he left. But he remains completely loyal to his art.

Alan Maltun