

# Nicholas Ray: The Glorious Failure of an American Director—a new biography of a major American filmmaker

Charles Bogle  
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In researching and writing *Nicholas Ray: The Glorious Failure of an American Director*, Patrick McGilligan performs the valuable service of tracing the fitful arc of a great and troubled director's life and career. Nicholas Ray's early life and its psychological connection to his movie years are established. McGilligan also unearths the profound influence of various Depression-era institutions and artists on Ray's own efforts. The biographer's discussion of Ray's work habits is valuable as well.

McGilligan condemns the anticommunist witch-hunts spearheaded by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) in the late 1940s and early 1950s and underscores their disastrous consequences for Hollywood and Ray specifically. However, the book is weakened by the biographer's apparent decision to excuse the director's naming names before the committee.

Born Raymond Nicholas Kienzle, Jr., in 1911 in La Crosse, Wisconsin, Nicholas Ray exhibited little interest in formal schooling (he dropped out of teachers college and then the University of Chicago). Instead, he was attracted to the theater, radio, and writing, and the Great Depression became his principal school for developing these interests.

After working backstage and acting with the Theater of Action, one of hundreds of left-wing "agitprop" groups that had sprung up nationally in the wake of the economic crash, Ray spent 1933 working with other artists in the communal atmosphere at famed architect's Frank Lloyd Wright's Taliesin summer home in Spring Green, Wisconsin. It was here that Ray first became serious about directing.

Ray also travelled with Alan Lomax in a Works Progress Administration-sponsored trip through the South recording folk artists (most famously, Lead Belly); he became and remained a member of the Communist Party USA for the rest of the 1930s; and he married and divorced Jean Evans, a backstage member of the Orson Welles-led Mercury Theater.

These experiences bore fruit in the 1940s and 1950s, Nicholas Ray's most productive years professionally. After working with actor-producer John Houseman (an associate of Welles) on the wartime propaganda radio show *Voice of America*, Ray followed

Houseman to Hollywood where he co-wrote with the latter and directed his magnificent debut movie, the tragic *They Live By Night* (1949). A number of important and critically acclaimed films (especially by members of the French auteurist school of critics and filmmakers) followed, including *In a Lonely Place* (1950), *On Dangerous Ground* (1952), *Johnny Guitar* (1954), *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) and *Bigger than Life* (1956).

The theme of elemental human desires being thwarted by a distorted society takes various forms in all of these films, but it is perhaps best realized in *They Live By Night*. (Ray's film was based on the 1937 novel *Thieves Like Us* by Edward Anderson, which was adapted again for film under its original title in 1974 by Robert Altman.)

In *They Live By Night* three escaped convicts—Arthur "Bowie" Bowers (Farley Granger), Chicamaw "One-Eye" Mobley (Howard Da Silva), and Henry "T-Dub" Mansfield (Jay C. Flippen)—hide out with Chicamaw's relations somewhere in the South before committing two robberies that result in the death of Chicamaw and T-Dub.

Because the camera focuses almost exclusively on the escaped convicts, Chicamaw's relations, and the people they encounter along the way who are struggling to get by (police appear infrequently, and they too appear helpless in the face of larger forces they barely understand), the audience comes to understand that these characters share the same simple, pure dreams that are in conflict with post-World War II America.

This theme reaches its zenith when Bowie and Chicamaw's niece, "Keechie" (Cathy O'Donnell), begin a cross-country journey with Bowie's share of the first robbery. Both of them were never allowed to enjoy a normal youth, and the first part of their trip is spent enjoying the simple pleasures they missed. Ray conveys the innocent, dream-like quality of their desires by using soft-focus close-ups and dialogue expurgated to meet Production Code stipulations.

But their enjoyment of innocent pleasures confronts a distorted, repressive society. Wrongfully accused of a murder, Bowie becomes the media-created leader of the "Bowie gang," and the consequence of their love and desire is tragedy of the highest sort. *They Live By Night* remains a remarkable, beautiful film.

The witch-hunts generated enormous pressures on left-wing artists such as Ray, who were not prepared for the onslaught. The

filmmaker's personal life began spiraling out of control during this period. Ray had a disastrous marriage to the gifted but unstable actress Gloria Grahame, and squired various Hollywood starlets from party to party while drinking, taking drugs and gambling away large sums of money.

Ray spent most of the 1960s in Europe, where he completed the last film released during his lifetime, *55 Days at Peking* (1963). Upon returning to America in 1969, Ray got by mostly on remuneration from editing and "cleaning up" other people's movies and never gave up his addictions (except for a brief respite late in life) or trying to make films until his death in 1979. He made a notable appearance in Wim Wenders' *The American Friend*, released in 1977.

McGilligan writes that for the future director, "in his life, as in his films, everything began at home," and presents a convincing case in support of his claim. Ray's father (who died when his son was sixteen) ruled with an "iron fist," was an alcoholic and womanizer. Conversely, his mother was the "velvet glove" who pampered her son and was a dutiful wife.

For Ray, these figures morphed into housewives who are generally self-sacrificing, while the husbands are often confused and embattled by larger forces they dimly grasp. These traits are found in the characters of Bowie and Keechie in *They Live By Night* (with Keechie also burdened by an alcoholic father), and the husband and wife in *Bigger than Life*. The familial relationships in *Rebel Without a Cause* best support McGilligan's contention that "Ray tended to load the blame on mother and father figures."

As for the influences on Ray's artistic development, the biographer asserts that the filmmaker owes much of his naturalistic style to the influence of the writer Thornton Wilder, under whom Ray studied during his brief, one-semester stay at the University of Chicago. His time spent with the Theater of Action, at Wright's Taliesin and recording folk artists with Alan Lomax, left Ray with a healthy skepticism about the "American way" and an appreciation of the benefits of collaborative work. Ray "thrived on community and collaboration," concludes the author.

Community and collaboration, along with a penchant for research, were central to Ray's filmmaking, as McGilligan meticulously details. Before filming *Rebel Without a Cause*, for example, Ray hired legal and psychological authorities on juvenile delinquency and then met with these authorities for their input during the story-writing stage of the film. He also held weekly gatherings of the film's actors and other "starry-eyed young hopefuls that were reminiscent of Taliesin," writes McGilligan.

Central to Ray's life were his joining the Communist Party and the postwar anticommunist hysteria that devoured so many. McGilligan, co-author with Paul Buhle of *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Blacklist*, an oral history of the purges in the entertainment industry, condemns the HUAC witch hunts. The period had devastating personal and artistic consequences for Ray, a sensitive figure. Already by 1951, he was forced or found himself obliged to work within "safe" Hollywood genres or direct outright propaganda films such as *Flying Leathernecks* with John Wayne and Robert Ryan (although screenwriter Gavin Lambert claimed that when making a point verbally was forbidden, "Nick had an extraordinary flair for making it visually").

But possessing this flair was no guarantee against censorship, as evidenced by the fact that Ray's 1961 spectacle, *King of Kings*, was the sixth consecutive film from which he was either discharged or left in disgust, or which was sabotaged by producers. As for Hollywood in general, McGilligan bluntly and correctly concludes, "The era of socially conscious picture-making had come to an end."

McGilligan blames Ray's decision to name names during the second round of HUAC hearings (before a secret committee, he identified, at the very least, his first wife, Jean Evans, for allegedly introducing him to the CP) on the director's self-destructive nature and the horror he must have felt while watching HUAC and the Hollywood community mete out punishment to many of his old friends.

But those who did not name names also watched in horror as their old friends were being exiled from Hollywood or imprisoned. And might some of these unfriendly witnesses also have suffered from self-destructive impulses?

McGilligan's conclusion sounds more like an excuse than a critical consideration of the type of shameful act that ruined countless careers and did great harm to Hollywood filmmaking in general. Is the biographer, in this instance, succumbing to the current attempts to rehabilitate the reputations of those who named names (i.e., the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' disgusting honoring of Elia Kazan) in order to rid Hollywood of the stench of the witch-hunts?

McGilligan also suffers from the academic's habit of relying too much on the opinions of critics when assessing the value of Ray's respective movies.

With these lapses in mind, *Nicholas Ray: The Glorious Tragedy of an American Director* remains an important work for anyone interested in the director's work or American film in general.

The biography concludes with an annotated filmography and a collection of notes from specific sources not cited in the acknowledgments.



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