

GiantGeorgeStevensJamesDean1956TextTVS

By Tim Van Schmidt

Giant \*\*\*\*

There's one thing viewers get to see in "Giant" that they wouldn't ever see again- that is, actor James Dean as an old man. "Giant" was Dean's last movie before dying in a car crash at age 24. In "Giant," the events take place over several decades, so by the end of the production, Dean and the other leading stars- Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor- get old and grey. Dean's character- a ranch hand turned oil tycoon- descends into a constant state of drunkenness, his hair thinning, speech slurred, becoming incapable of speaking to a crowd or marrying the woman he proposes to. It's not a pretty sight. Is that what Dean would have become as a mature artist?

What also is not pretty in "Giant" is the shadow of racism that moves throughout the long, sprawling movie. Ultimately, despite a story that follows the lives of a rich assortment of characters- who are mostly rich financially- that's what "Giant" is all about: the social segregation of white Texans and people of Mexican heritage. This racial prejudice affects all of the main characters- it's the major flaw that ends up destroying Dean's character; it's one of the major problems between Taylor and Hudson's married characters; and it's the impetus for one of their sons to embarrass the family in a major social situation.

The most fascinating actors on the screen in "Giant" are Dean and Taylor. Dean's ranch hand character shies away from others with a kind of confused humbleness, his face obscured by his hat, standing in the shadows, slumping down in a heap in a chair. The older version of the character is not so shy outwardly, but he is hiding nonetheless- in the debilitating haze of alcohol.

Taylor's character is feisty and even kind of annoying, despite her arresting good looks. However, that feistiness is the one thing that brings hope to her husband's Texas ranch- for her family members and for the Hispanic workers who live in a nearby village. Without regard for the predominant social structure, she insists on saving a sick Mexican baby; without regard to her husband's family traditions, she encourages her children to follow their personal desires. Eventually it is her approval that becomes the ultimate standard for everybody, including her powerful husband.

Still, the underlying tension in the movie is the racial issue- it is much more widespread than the influence of even a powerful woman. This is illustrated in the return of a white Texan and a Hispanic boy

from serving in the armed forces in World War II. The white Texan returns to a marching band and a cheering crowd. The Hispanic boy returns home in a coffin to a lonely greeting and a sad funeral.

"Giant" is full of sweeping landscapes and the big ideas of the characters. It's also full of misunderstanding and insensitivity. Perhaps that's why the change that occurs especially in the rich rancher becomes the movie's triumph. It seems that power, money and lots of land doesn't prevent a person from being stupid when it comes to the people around them. Getting smart may take decades and a lot of heartache.

Directed by George Stevens...1956...201 min...featuring Elizabeth Taylor, Rock Hudson, James Dean, Chill Wills, Dennis Hopper, Sal Mineo, Rod Taylor.