

THE DARK SHADINGS OF ROBERT RYAN

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY J. R. Jones

Like so many other artists who worked in film noir, Robert Ryan never imagined back in the 1940s and '50s that the movies he was making would be so seriously considered decades later. He often cited *Crossfire* (1947) or *The Set-Up* (1949) or *Inferno* (1953) as his best work, but most of his other noirs he dismissed as simple crime pictures. Ryan chafed against the typecasting that had shaped his career ever since his breakout performance as the racist murderer in *Crossfire*. He yearned for other dramatic opportunities and ultimately found his greatest satisfaction and acclaim in legitimate theater in the '60s, performing classics of the American stage (*The Front Page*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*) both on and off Broadway and filming Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* with John Frankenheimer. When Ryan died in 1973, he'd just completed a grimly effective performance as a mob boss hunted by assassins in John Flynn's noir revival *The Outfit*. But he'd also signed to appear on Broadway in the western musical *Shenandoah*.

Despite his mixed feelings about the genre, Ryan connected with noir at a critical point, just as it was developing into a shadowy interrogation of postwar American values, and he brought to that enterprise a good deal of private feeling and personal experience. Growing up in Chicago, he'd seen the American dream turned inside out when his father and uncles lost their construction firm following the stock market crash. For six years, as the Depression ground on, Ryan worked a series of dead-end jobs before an unlikely investment paid off and enabled him to take his chances in Hollywood. He interrupted his film career to enlist in the Marines in 1943, and though he never saw combat, his two-year stint as a drill sergeant at Camp Pendleton in California acquainted him with the worst in men and readied him for his breakthrough role in *Crossfire*. A committed liberal, Ryan often played men he hated, but he never played a man he didn't understand.

His childhood in Chicago afforded him an intimate look at the sort of powerful men he would later embody onscreen. His great uncle was T.E. Ryan, a real estate magnate and a mover and shaker in the local Democratic Party; his father, Timothy Ryan, left the little canal town of Lockport, Illinois, in the 1890s and moved north to Chicago to become T.E.'s political protégé. Uncle and nephew eventually fell out, but Tim banded together with four of his brothers who lived in Chicago to launch a construction firm that would thrive on his political connections. From his uncle's south-side turf he moved to the far north side with his new wife, Mabel Bushnell, a Michigan woman he'd met while she was a switchboard operator for the *Chicago Tribune*, and little Bob arrived November 11, 1909. The boy grew to manhood amid the practical, hardball politics of

the Democratic machine, and he never forgot what he saw. It bred in him a sureness and cynicism that would inform his performances as big-time operators in movies like *Caught* (1949), *The Racket* (1951), and *House of Bamboo* (1955).

Ryan was a pampered but solitary boy: his younger brother, John, died of influenza in 1917, and his parents, devastated by the loss, never had another child, preferring to smother Bob. He fell in love with the movies and Douglas Fairbanks in particular, and his close proximity to the busy Essanay Studio in the Uptown neighborhood

allowed him the opportunity to watch movies being made and even get work as an extra. A

lazy student, he was sent to Loyola

Academy, a Jesuit prep school

just north in the Rogers Park neighborhood, whose strict

priests introduced him to notions of sin and redemption

that would later turn up in movies like *Act*

of Violence (1948) and

On Dangerous Ground (1952). He excelled at

sports but also developed a passion for

literature, inspired greatly by his English

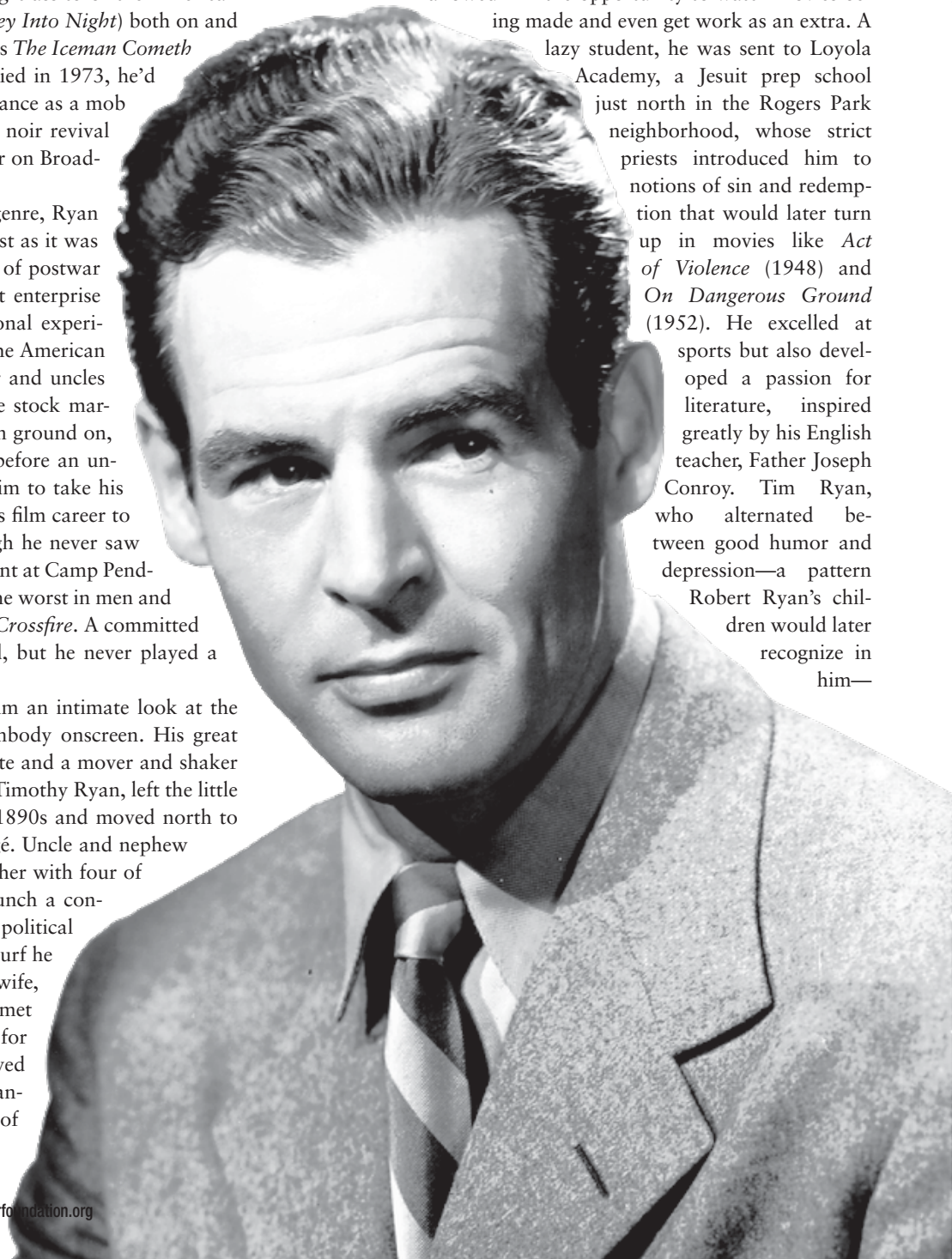
teacher, Father Joseph Conroy. Tim Ryan,

who alternated between good humor and

depression—a pattern

Robert Ryan's children would later

recognize in him—





wanted Bob to join the family business, an idea the boy couldn't stand. He wanted to be a writer.

By the late '20s the Ryans had grown prosperous indeed: chauffeured limousines, summer homes, and European vacations were all part of their lifestyle. Bob enrolled at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, where his greatest accomplishments were athletic; his father had pushed him into boxing at an early age, and at Dartmouth he became an intercollegiate champion, retiring undefeated in his senior year. (His skill in the ring would serve him well onscreen, most memorably in *The Set-Up*.) But the stock market crash in October 1929 changed everything, cleaning out Tim Ryan and his brothers. Another crisis followed in April 1931 when a fire broke out in a sewer tunnel project Tim was supervising. According to some reports a workmen had dropped a candle into the sawdust and timber then used to shore up the concrete, and the fire crept under the tunnel wall, pumping black smoke all through the night and killing 11 trapped workers and firefighters. Tim broke down and wept at the inquest as he described firefighters racing into the hole to rescue his trapped men.

Ryan graduated amid the Depression, and the next six years of his life are sketchily documented; talking to the press, he invariably boiled them down to a litany of soul-crushing jobs. He came to New York looking for newspaper work and eventually shipped out as an engine stoker on a freighter making runs to Africa. After that he found work as a sand-hogger (digging a tunnel beneath the Hudson River), photographic model (he was the first to advertise jockey shorts), conflicted bill collector (on one occasion he felt so badly for the bereft family that he came back and returned the money), and bodyguard for a bootlegger (no details on that one have ever emerged). Back in Chicago, Ryan Construction was imploding; all five of the brothers, including Tim, died within 18 months of each other. Bob came home to look after his mother and, owing to his late father's political connections, got a patronage job with the city's Department of Education. This so bored him that he took up theater, and in 1938, after a \$300 oil-well investment yielded a \$2,000 payoff, he moved to Hollywood to become an actor.

This trip west was an awakening for Ryan. He joined the actors' workshop of the great German theater director Max Reinhardt, who inspired him, Ryan later wrote, to probe "the inner life of man, the mysterious spirit that both flickers and flames in all of us." At the Reinhardt school he also met the woman who would be his wife for 33 years: Jessica Cadwalader, a Quaker raised in Berkeley, California, who impressed him with her sharp mind, liberal opinions, and good values. After they married in 1939,

she quit acting to become a writer and published four books of fiction. Bob and Jessica Ryan respected each other deeply and, as he became a success in movies, avoided the Hollywood social scene to concentrate on raising their children. In the early 50s—when Ryan was at RKO playing the heels and psychopaths that would make him a noir icon—the couple threw themselves into the complicated task of launching a progressive grade school in North Hollywood. Today the Oakwood School is one of the most prestigious private schools in Los Angeles.

But there was a dark side to Ryan as well. He drank too much and suffered from bouts of depression—"black Irish moods," he called them. In public he could be quietly charming, the strong silent type, but at home with his children he could be distant and withdrawn. He rarely talked about his boyhood and never about his father's death; in fact some of his children suspect their grandfather had committed suicide. Ryan's tireless political activities—championing the ACLU during the McCarthy years, protesting nuclear proliferation, campaigning for civil rights, questioning the Vietnam war—sprang from a gnawing sense that his chosen profession was shallow and narcissistic. He recoiled from the hobnobbing and false friendships of the movie business—then fumed when the good roles went to more enterprising actors. Like many men of his generation, he kept his frustrations buttoned up, and when they had a chance to burst out in some of his more angry and neurotic characters, they hinted at a man with more issues than he would ever let on.

"I like stories about guys who get knocked around," Ryan told an AP reporter in 1949, "because most people do get knocked around." He was promoting *The Set-Up* at the time, but the remark still reveals how intuitively Ryan understood film noir as a genre. He'd enjoyed a life of privilege and then hit the pavement hard, working menial jobs and watching from a distance as his father was crushed by the Depression. He came away from the experience with a workman's sense of social conscience and an acute understanding of personal anguish. Ernest Borgnine has referred to Ryan as an actor's actor, but in fact he was more like a writer's actor, irresistibly drawn to stormy characters, and nowhere else did he find more of them than in film noir. The movies considered in this issue prove how adept Robert Ryan was at capturing that mysterious spirit, which might have flickered but in his case almost always flamed.

J.R. Jones is film critic for the Chicago Reader. His story "The Actor's Letter," detailing Ryan's early years, can be found at chicagoreader.com, along with the text of a 20-page memoir Ryan wrote for his children. ■