

My Life and the Final Days of Hollywood,
by Claude Jarman Jr. Covenant Books,
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“I was carried on a satin cushion and then dropped into the garbage can.” (Bobby Driscoll, qtd. in Parish 57)

The bitter observation of child actor Bobby Driscoll, who won a special Academy Award for his performance in *The Window* (1949), sums up the attitude of many actors that have found themselves built up and feted, only to be cast aside by the studio system’s ruthless prioritising of the bottom line. The annals of Hollywood history are littered with tales of child actors financially exploited by guardians; worn down by unrelenting schedules; terrorised by directors and moguls; sinking into addiction and, in the case of some such as Driscoll, succumbing to early deaths. Invariably, the stories of the casualties make for juicy reading—even if the particular star rarely profits from book sales—but accounts of those that emerged from the system relatively unscathed, or that voluntarily checked out of it, are rarer and generally elicit less interest from the public.

In his recently published memoir, *My Life and the Final Days of Hollywood*, child actor Claude Jarman Jr. seems acutely aware of just how ubiquitous his story is and how fortunate he was to weather the intense media storm that accompanied his relatively brief career in films. The details of that career might have been written by a Hollywood publicist: a regular kid from Tennessee, Jarman was plucked from obscurity by MGM director Clarence Brown, who visited his school as part of an (unannounced) talent search in 1945. Brown was in the process of casting his film version of the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings novel, *The Yearling*, and was searching for a child to play the lead role of Jody, a boy growing up in the scrubland of post-Civil War Florida. Fed up with the precocious kids of the talent schools around Los Angeles, and bored by the usual stable of child stars on the MGM lot, Brown flew his plane to the American heartland and commenced his search. After several disheartening weeks, he chanced upon the Eakin Elementary School in Nashville and, posing as a schools inspector, visited the fifth grade classroom where Jarman was unpinning a Valentine’s Day display. It was a moment of serendipity: Jarman had the blond good looks that made for instant box-office appeal, but it was his slightly unkempt hair that convinced Brown that he would be perfect for the part of Jody.

A contract soon followed and, six weeks later, Jarman reported to the primary production location of Ocala, Florida. For this sheltered eleven-year old, whose experience of acting was limited to a few appearances in school productions, it was simultaneously exciting and bewildering. Almost immediately, it became apparent that his debut shoot would be a veritable “trial by fire” (Jarman 26). Brown had a reputation as a meticulous, demanding taskmaster, a man that pushed both his cast and his crew to their limits and presided over a set where work came first and where “cut” was called only when he was satisfied—even if it meant

inordinate takes and universal exhaustion. As Jarman outlines, Brown's perfectionism and his ever-increasing grumpiness might be excused, given the weight of expectations that accompanied the production. Even before the first shot was taken, *The Yearling* was in deficit because this was MGM's third attempt to bring the Rawlings novel to the screen. Back in 1941, the studio had spent a fortune on a production helmed by Victor Fleming, but months of preproduction and weeks of shooting had to be scrapped when the director admitted defeat in the face of resistance from his cantankerous star Spencer Tracy, from Gene Eckman (a child actor that had been cast as Jody and that happened to be petrified of animals) and from the unforgiving Florida humidity and the host of rapacious insects that waged war on cast and crew. A subsequent revival by King Vidor collapsed before a frame was shot. MGM reasoned that the third attempt might be the charm and certainly Brown proved luckier than Fleming had been in the choice of leading man: Spencer Tracy had been replaced by the even-tempered Gregory Peck, playing Jody's father, and an amiable leading lady (Jacqueline White) was cast in the Ma Baxter role. Even with these changes, though, Brown rapidly discovered that some things remained the same: the Florida climate was just as daunting as it had been in Fleming's day and nature viewed this latest band of Hollywood interlopers with the same voracious appetite. Jarman recalls a set that became increasingly fraught as the weeks wore on and as Brown realised that the authentic atmosphere generated by shooting on location didn't necessarily result in usable footage. Extant correspondence between second-unit director Chester Franklin and his brother Sidney (producer of *The Yearling*) has suggested that Brown's frequent explosions of temper were directed at everyone, including his own protégé (Young 278), but Jarman's own account here contradicts this. He recalls Brown as a protective and generally patient mentor, who was keen to ensure that his "discovery" retain the natural, unaffected air that was the essence of his charm, while developing techniques that would help him mine the emotional depth the role demanded.

In the end, the months in Ocala yielded little viable footage and before the summer was out, Brown's company had been called back to Los Angeles where White was replaced by the more experienced Jane Wyman and the remaining scenes were shot on the backlot and on location at nearby Lake Arrowhead. Still, the time spent on location weren't entirely a waste, as Jarman recalls: "I was placed in the proper setting, guided by a master director, and assisted by accomplished talent and fortunately for everyone, I responded accordingly. I lived the part" (37). Perhaps it had also given him a false picture of how most film productions worked: he was allowed to flourish under the close attention of an experienced mentor whom he adored, and his confidence was further boosted by the generosity of supportive co-stars (most notably, Peck). Reality soon struck as MGM readied the film for release and Jarman began to realise that his accomplishment, while it brought him welcome rewards and prestige (including an Oscar), had the more unsettling effect of transforming him from raw talent to valuable commodity. With 1947 declared "The Year of *The Yearling*", he was sent out on a gruelling nationwide tour to promote the film. Jarman offers a vivid account of what it's like to be at the receiving end of a slick publicity drive—the exhausting travel; the blinding light of hundreds of flashbulbs exploding in your face; the confusion of being "loved" so much by fans that they quite literally want a piece of you; the surreal experience of walking a fully grown deer on a leash down Fifth Avenue and, more than anything, the sense of utter powerlessness: "my world had turned upside down, and I was clinging on for dear life ... I realized I had boarded a train I couldn't stop. It was not within my power to change the course of my life at that time, but I knew I would someday. I would step out of the limelight" (51).

When the ballyhoo eventually abated, Jarman was faced with the task of sustaining his career in the face of considerable challenges. Sometimes the roles that he yearned for, such as the lead in John Huston's *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951), eluded him; frequently, he was cast in parts that failed to showcase his talents or that quite simply could have been played by

anyone (he cites *Fair Wind to Java* (1953) as the nadir of his career—and he’s right). Assessing Jarman’s career, it seems clear that his brief stardom was a product of the specific climate in Hollywood cinema of the late 1940s: with audiences abandoning the theatres and pledging allegiance to television, the studios cast around for ways to lure them back. One method was to champion productions that tackled social issues or that promised audiences a sense of “authenticity”—in storylines, performances and atmosphere—that might rival the Italian neorealist productions then in vogue. There’s no doubt that Jarman’s much admired “natural” qualities as a performer, combined with the promotion of him as having “inhabited” the part of Jody in *The Yearling*, initially worked in his favour. However, if playing a “child of Nature” helped make him a star, it was Nature that played its part in the difficulties that lay ahead. As he wrapped up his “year of *The Yearling*”, puberty inconveniently struck and he entered the “awkward age” so feared by studios. Corporate indifference to the child star that has outgrown “cuteness” is commonplace, but in Jarman’s case he had the added misfortune of being under contract to a studio that was facing a rapid decline in revenue and the disintegration of its own corporate identity. A key factor in a certain lack of momentum in his career post-*The Yearling* was MGM’s mismanagement of him, but Jarman concedes that his own ambivalence didn’t help matters: he confesses that he was simply less motivated, less ambitious than some of his peers such as Elizabeth Taylor. Even in the days when his career was red-hot and he was attending MGM’s “Little Red Schoolhouse”, he recalls being baffled by the undercurrent of professional competitiveness that shaped interactions with his classmates.

Jarman’s experience of the Industry wasn’t entirely negative, however: when teamed with a strong director, such as Mark Robson (on *Roughshod* (1949)) or John Ford (on *Rio Grande* (1950)), he was able to deliver convincing and often complex performances of young men not quite at ease in their own skin, and he proved able to hold his own in the company of co-stars such as John Wayne and Maureen O’Hara. He also got to collaborate with Brown for a second time, on a version of William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust* (1949) shot on location in Oxford, Mississippi, and turned in a respectable performance as Chick Mallison, the boy-turned-investigator that seeks evidence to exonerate a falsely accused black neighbour. It was an important film and he acquitted himself well, though he was invariably overshadowed by the charismatic and commanding Juano Hernandez, playing the role of the accused man.

By the early 1950s Jarman had relocated back to Tennessee and thereafter was selective in the films he choose to make. After a stint in university, and some time working outside the Industry, he reconnected to Hollywood, on his own terms: he became involved in the San Francisco Film Festival in the 1960s and used his Hollywood connections to secure prestigious guests. As such, he played an important role in ensuring that the filmmakers and the stars of the classical era would not be forgotten. He championed, too, the work of emerging talent and of European filmmakers such as Federico Fellini and Agnès Varda, as well as of up-and-coming artists such as Barbara Loden and Sidney Lumet. In that respect, both Jarman and his team helped foster the climate of cinephilia that dominated American culture in the 1960s—one that remains unequalled.

Jarman’s account of his time in the “final days” of Hollywood strikes a successful balance between evocative nostalgia and the detached, observational tone necessary to record what it was like to be on the inside of the system and then cast out. The measured, philosophical attitude Jarman adopts when looking back at his Hollywood career is, for the most part, maintained, even if a hint of bitterness creeps in as he remembers the expectations and then the disappointments; the forging of intense relationships and their subsequent dissolution. Though he remained close to Brown and later sought completion funding from him for a music documentary (*Fillmore* (1972)), it is clear that the seventy years that have elapsed since he was “discovered” have given Jarman time to consider the complexities of their relationship and his

own feelings for his mentor: “he gave me a career, then left me floundering in subsequent mediocre pictures for a factory that did not nurture or guide me as only a caring mentor could” (87). Though it may not be explicitly stated, the power dynamic between the Industry insider and the novice is here laid bare: Brown was an artist, and on a personal level he seems to have genuinely cared for Jarman, but he was also a businessman and his “discovery” was an important asset that could attest to his own talents as a “maker of stars”.

My Life and the Final Days of Hollywood is a slim volume, extremely readable and engrossing and with moments of dry humour. Although Jarman touches on the impact that his career had on his family life and especially on his father—who suspended his own career so that his son might initiate his own—and also reveals one of the most traumatic incidents of his life—an automobile accident that resulted in a fatality—the form favoured here is that of the episodic memoir, rather than in-depth autobiography. Anecdotes and sketches work well to conjure up the atmosphere of a time and a place now past, and to convey some sense of what it’s like to be swept up by the Hollywood machine, but those seeking a dense and revelatory account of the span of a person’s life, in all its contradictions and complexities, may be left wanting more.

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