



Blackboard Jungle (1955) Relevant Now, Relevant Then

Description

Written and reviewed by Larry Gleeson

The [*Blackboard Jungle*](#) directed by Richard Brooks and based on Evan Hunter's novel of the same title, is a cautionary tale of when conservatism runs amok — think “wildings” — and the crack epidemic in New York City during the 1980s and early 1990s. Brooks uses a school for his setting. Brooks shows the audience an unruly, and undisciplined students, refusing to follow basic classroom and assembly procedures, assaulting teachers, and wielding switch blades. The students make the rules, and the teachers go along out of fear and apathy.

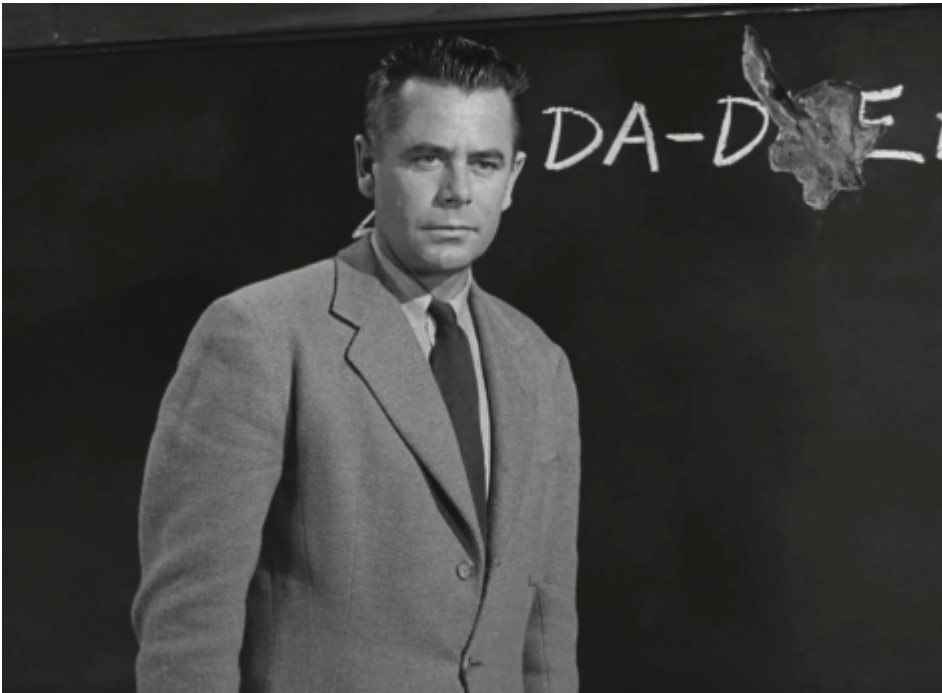


Mr. Dadier (Glen Ford) is new to the school. He is a veteran of World War II and has beautiful and pregnant wife (Ann Francis) he is attempting to support and provide for. Dadier, quickly becomes known as Daddio. Despite his soft-spoken nature Dadier has moral fiber and is willing to go to any lengths to keep his classroom safe for those students who want to learn. A young Sidney Portier (Gregory J. Miller) is a refined, quiet student who has all the markings of a leader. Dadier sees this and continuously attempts to persuade Miller to use his leadership talents for the good of the class. Initially, Miller gets the students to answer all of Mr. Dadier's questions erroneously. Through time and effort, Dadier wins over Miller and the rest of the class with the exception of two ne'er do wells portrayed exceptionally by Vic Morrow and Danny Dennis.



The film opens with white text overlay and a deep black background with the words,

“We, in the United States, are fortunate to have a school system that is a tribute to our communities and to our faith in American youth. Today we are concerned with juvenile delinquency – its causes – and its effect. We are especially concerned when this delinquency boils over into our schools. The scenes and incidents depicted here are fictional. However, we believe that public awareness is a first step toward a remedy for any problem. It is in this spirit that the BLACKBOARD JUNGLE was produced.”



Having recently viewed the 1995 French film, *La Haine* (Matthew Kassovitz) in the not-too-distant past, I saw a distinct similarity. Both films are shot in black and white showing the socially marginalized in gritty, documentary style. Both films use pop music and cultural props. Interestingly, *Blackboard Jungle*, is almost as well known for its soundtrack, as it is for its narrative. When I heard the non-diegetic, Bill Haley and His Comets' "Rock Around the Clock," after the scrolling public service announcement, I immediately sensed something was awry. Later, as Dadier goes to have a drink with mathematics teacher, Joshua (Richard Kiley) Joshua is feeling the music of Stan Kenton and His Orchestra's "Invention for Guitar and Trumpet." The next day Joshua brings in his jazz collection to share his math class, beginning with Bix Beiderbecke and His Gang's "The Jazz Me Blues." Unfortunately, as well intentioned as Joshua is, he doesn't have the moral fortitude of Dadier, and his class rebels in a destructive fashion.



Blackboard Jungle received four Oscar nominations including, Best Screenplay, Best Editing, Best Cinematography Black and White, and Best Art Direction, Black and White. Glen Ford carries Dadier with credibility. And, Portier has the mark of greatness tattooed all over him. Furthermore, I found Brooks's use of music to convey a potent theme. After the scrolling PSA, the Rock 'n Roll anthem of "Rock Around the Clock," foreshadows society's indifference to the plight of the underclass and the ramifications of social indifference. As the Trump Administration and its acolytes proclaim the Department of Education is a disaster and needs to be abolished, *Blackboard Jungle* is as relevant today as it was in 1955. With a runtime of one hour and forty-one minutes, *Blackboard Jungle* is very highly recommended.



Category

1. #TCM
2. 31 Days of Oscar
3. television

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