

Little Caesar

Alan L. Gansberg

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The film-star subject of this splendid biography is often remembered as the tough-talking gangster who, along with James Cagney, Paul Muni, and Leo Gorcey, made the underworld of crime and the mob a vicariously thrilling world.

As the author (a film historian, an award-winning writer, producer, and director working in television, film, and documentaries, and is a professor of film at Columbia College Hollywood) points out, Robinson's acting range was much broader than the noir film or the crime thriller. Gansberg elegantly narrates the life and times of Emmanuel Goldenberg, who eventually took the world of stage and film by storm as Edward G. Robinson.

In 1903, the Goldenberg family moved from Romania to New York seeking, like many other immigrant families, the paradise of America. Their early days in America were hardly paradise as they occupied a dingy tenement on Broome Street in Lower Manhattan. The Goldenbergs' new domicile could not rival the beauty of their Romanian homeland, but in spite of this disappointment their son, Manny (as he was then called), began to discover that America might indeed be land of opportunity.

When he entered public school, Robinson could speak Yiddish, Hebrew, German, and Romanian, but not English. He listened attentively to his teachers and classmates, imitating them, and eventually mastering the language of his new land as well as losing any trace of an accent.

By the time he was a teenager, he had tried his hand at a number of extracurricular activities and found his home in the dramatic arts. As a high school sophomore, Robinson recited a soliloquy from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* before the class, and his teacher realized immediately the measure of Robinson's talent: "I happened to look up and there was Robinson, lost to the world ... I knew then that he had dramatic imagination." Robinson pursued his chosen career with abandon. He entered the Academy of the Dramatic Arts in 1912, officially changed his name, and appeared in his first production, *The Pillars of Society*.

Gansberg charts Robinson's rise from the Bronx to Broadway and finally to his big screen break with Warner Brothers, when he appeared as a small-time gangster named Cesare "Rico" Bandello who joins a big city mob and then ruthlessly takes over the gang. The film catapulted Robinson to great success and he was soon the studio's most bankable star.

This is the definitive and authoritative biography of Robinson. He not only traces the evolution of Robinson's acting career but also narrates the role that politics played in the actor's life and in the life of Hollywood (Robinson was involved in anti-Fascist organizations). Gansberg's engaging prose and his illuminating history provide the most complete and most elegant life of Robinson now available.

HENRY L. CARRIGAN (August 18, 2009)

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