

THE MARILYN MYSTIQUE

My first on-screen crush was Natalie Wood in *Rebel Without a Cause*. I was 16. Wood's soulful eyes and short-sleeved angora sweaters were magical, though the film was already 30 years old. Marilyn Monroe, on the other hand, wasn't on my radar. There was the Elton John song, and every cartoon I grew up with did a riff parodying the flying white skirt scene in *The Seven Year Itch*. I knew she'd been in *Playboy*, and that was kind of hot. But I was more interested in the current crop of celebrities undressing in my dad's magazines: Victoria Principal, Barbi Benton, Kim Basinger.

Monroe has outlasted and outshined them all, despite having died 50 years ago in August. Last year witnessed *My Week With Marilyn* (starring Michelle Williams as Monroe), artist Seward Johnson's 26-foot-tall cartoony homage, *Forever Marilyn*, in Chicago (relocated to Palm Springs in May), and a special bottling of the very popular Marilyn Merlot wine, celebrating its own 25th Anniversary. The NBC show *Smash* chronicles the lives of theater actors, writers and pro-

50 YEARS AFTER HER DEATH, SHE'S STILL TURNING HEADS. BY ROBERT HAYNES-PETERSON

ducers as they work to bring a Marilyn-themed musical to Broadway. Monroe's image also graced this year's poster for the 65th anniversary of the Cannes Film Festival and the cover of *Vanity Fair*, promoting the release of previously unpublished nudes by photographer Lawrence Schiller. The other blonde bombshells of the 1950s—Jayne Mansfield, Mamie Van Doren, Sheree North and so on—haven't enjoyed the same posthumous career.

"When you look at photographs of her, she has this ability to express herself in so many ways," says Donna Holder, co-founder of Marilyn Wines. "I don't think she's this dumb blonde at all. She was just kind of a straightforward person. A beautiful person."

Why this hold on us in 2012? Contemporaries speak of an emotionally fragile, but highly canny, comic actress. In outtakes from the Laurence Olivier film *The Prince and the Showgirl* (the setting for *My Week With Marilyn*), we see an actress repeatedly missing her lines and cues, frustrating the prim Olivier. Yet we also see her vulnerability, beauty and overwhelming desire to be appreciated. When she finally gets a scene right, she nails it. While watching these clips I finally understood the Marilyn Magic, and developed a new classic screen crush. You ache to protect her as much as to kiss her.

Norma Jeane Mortenson Baker, that spunky kid from L.A., continues to attract new generations of fans. On Facebook, a quote attributed to Ella Fitzgerald has been making the rounds, in which the African-American jazz singer credits Monroe with expanding Fitzgerald's fan base into the mainstream. Monroe's own Facebook fan page boasts 3.2 million fans, over half of which are younger than 25. I recently joined Pinterest, a bulletin board-style website used for organizing all the web stuff you want others to see. One of my "followers" on the site, a young woman of maybe 25, had two boards (categories) I noticed immediately: "Old Hollywood" and "Movies I Love." Guess whose platinum-haired visage graced both?