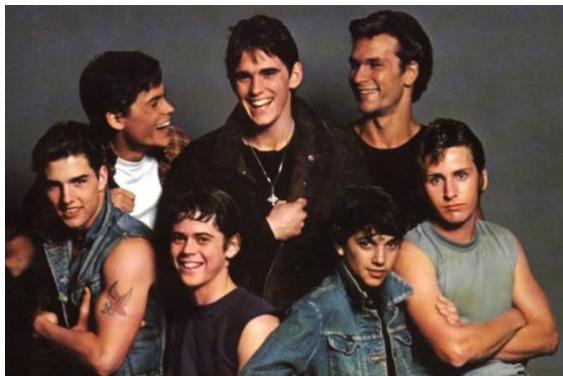


The Outsiders

By Emily Soares



Inspired by a letter from a California junior high school teacher whose students demanded the film be made with Francis Ford Coppola as its director, *The Outsiders* is a piece of casting genius, and for millions of teenagers in 1983, one of the few films that delivered a story they could really connect with.

When Susie (S.E.) Hinton agreed to option her book to Coppola's bankrupt Zoetrope Studios, she

asked for \$5,000. But the studio was moving toward the auction block, so Coppola offered her \$500 with the rest to follow. Hinton agreed on the condition that she could hang out on the set and get a bit part. She played a nurse.

The disaster of *One From the Heart* – losing in the neighborhood of \$25 million – proved catastrophic for Coppola's film empire, but he still managed to raise the funds for *The Outsiders*, and the production headed to Tulsa, where the book is set. Casting Director Fred Roos, who had already worked his magic on *The Godfather* and *American Graffiti*, applied his talents to the Hinton novel with prescient savvy. The cast reads like a who's who of the '80s hall of heartthrobs: Matt Dillon, C. Thomas Howell, Emilio Estevez, Tom Cruise, Ralph Macchio, Rob Lowe, Patrick Swayze, Leif Garrett and Diane Lane. Because money was tight, Coppola negotiated with the film's stars to work well below their usual salary. They readily agreed – working with Coppola was a thrill for the young actors.

The film's tale is a simple one: the battle between working class "Greasers" and affluent "Socs" (soshes) in 1960's Tulsa. Calling the film "A *Gone With the Wind* for 14-year-old girls", Coppola wanted to remain true to Hinton's sparsely drawn fiction but paint its characters in epic scale, following lavish Hollywood traditions. The large letters sweeping across the screen at the film's opening and the golden hues of its cinematography, replete with sunsets, gilded clouds and the broad Tulsa landscape, all recall *Gone With the Wind* and the widescreen Panavision of the teen genre's most towering example, *Rebel Without a Cause*.

Using sophisticated electronics equipment, Coppola blocked all the scenes in a school gymnasium while cast and crew sat in Tulsa, waiting for a distributor. He shot everything on video in front of a blue screen, so that backgrounds could be superimposed by production designer Dean Tavoularis to see how scenes would work before they were committed to film.

The process saved Coppola time and money, two commodities he was not in the habit of worrying over.

With Zoetrope mired in auctions and lawsuits, Coppola was happy to get away to the nowhere expanses of Tulsa. As he told *New York Times* feature writer Aljean Harmetz, “It was chaos incorporated at Zoetrope, like fighting a war. I used to be a great camp counselor, and the idea of being with half a dozen kids in the country making a movie seemed like being a camp counselor again. It would be a breath of fresh air. I’d forget my troubles and have some laughs again.”

And by and large, he did. The shoot went off without a hitch – except for a few injuries sustained by the young cast in an overly realistic rehearsal of the rumble scene. Any tensions on the set were created intentionally by Coppola, who really wanted his Greasers and Socs to dislike each other. So, he installed the Greaser gang on the third floor of the hotel being rented for the shoot, told hotel staff to provide slow and sloppy room service, handed out pittance per diems and delivered their scripts in dime-store binders.

The Soc cast members, on the other hand, were housed on the hotel’s top floor, waited on hand and foot, had daily allowances large enough to rent a car and were given scripts bound in leather. The resulting polarization was effective. The Socs partied in high-end Tulsa discos while the Greasers spent their evenings at mud-wrestling matches. The Greasers prepared meals together and spent hours acting like a family in marathon improvisation sessions. They practiced tai chi, took train-hopping lessons from Swayze and played tackle football.

Seeking to develop true delinquency in his actors, Coppola encouraged them to take over a local café and conduct a massive food fight while he captured it on video for future study. Coppola helped Dillon get into character by asking him to indulge in some work-related shoplifting. “We actually went into this drugstore, and I stole a pack of cigarettes,” Dillon remembered. “Francis said, ‘Don’t worry, man, we’ll bail you out.’ It was a lot of fun.”

Like the *Godfather*, *The Outsiders* is about belonging and about the notion of real “family” extending beyond biological bonds. But also as in the *Godfather* films, the ties between brothers are vital. Howell, Lowe and Swayze play the Curtis brothers, orphaned since their parents were killed in a car accident and doing their best to make ends meet and keep Ponyboy (Howell) out of a foster home.

Johnny (Macchio), Two-Bit (Estevez), and Steve (Cruise) are other members of the gang, but the undisputed rough-and-tumble leader is Dallas (Dillon), whose decidedly un-Oklahoma accent is worked around by having the character come from a New York juvenile facility. While on the set, Dillon approached Coppola about his favorite Hinton book, *Rumble Fish*. The director read the book during shooting, agreed to develop it into a film and cast Dillon as the lead. Coppola decided to go ahead and shoot the film back-to-back with *The Outsiders* and stayed on in Tulsa, using much of the same crew and some of the cast. In addition to Dillon, Lane and Tom Waits (who had a bit part in *The Outsiders*), and several other actors stuck around to do *Rumble*

Fish, which would be considered *The Outsiders*' companion piece and, with its dark, stark European sensibilities, its foil.

Though *The Outsiders* was not well received by critics, teenagers loved it. The film held the top box office spot for over a month. By the time its first run was over it proved to be Coppola's most successful film in almost five years and remains a favorite of Hinton and Coppola fans. *The Outsiders* airs on Friday, May 28 at 11 a.m. and Saturday, May 29 at 2 a.m. ET/PT.