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Reviews and Criticisms

Bernie Hargis

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Reviews and Criticisms
by
Bernie Hargis

In Fulfillment of Special Studies Project

May 5, 1971

(Drama---1 hour)

* * *

*Excellent -
Fresh, stimulating reviews*



A word of explanation:

For my Special Studies Project this semester, I wrote a selection of motion picture reviews for various editions of Ouachita's Signal. This required me to see at least two films each week and to write the subsequent criticisms. Invariably I had to go out of town to see the necessary films. Since I shared the job of columnist with Joe Kirby, I wrote a review only every other week, for a total of seven articles. This project will be worth one hour's credit in drama.

Naive youth takes wing with aid of angel friend

by Bernie Hargis
SIGNAL Columnist

One of the first films released in 1970 was a pitch black satirical comedy entitled "MASH." Though it was the initial effort of

an unknown young director, Robert Altman, it was obviously the work of a genius. Rarely, if ever, had such an imaginative, outrageous style been used in a film.

However, it had problems. Though the movie was made up of uncommonly brilliant pieces, the overall effect somehow seemed incomplete. It was as though Altman had become deeply inspired and rushed out to make the film, only to run short of ideas needed to tie the project together. The result was that he created three-fourths of a great movie.

Altman's second film, "Brewster McCloud," however, is a totally complete work of comic art. Though there are occasional flaws and nuances, nothing can stop the fabulous imagination and uniquely beautiful directorial style that have fully matured in this picture. It becomes astonishingly apparent that Altman is not only one of the most gifted directors at work in films today, but possibly the most original man in the field of comedy.

The plot is wonderfully outrageous without being silly or trite. Brewster is a naive young man who lives under the Astrodome and wants to fly—and I mean literally, with wings, feathers, the whole bit. He has a guardian-angel friend named Louise who's been this route before and promises to help him as long as he doesn't yield to earthly temptations. Together they spend each day preparing for the big flight and placidly murdering everyone who gets in their way with the help of a pet raven who rather unceremoniously relieves himself in each victim's eye.

The movie churns along at a lightning pace poking fun at practically everything and making even the most common situations hysterically funny. Then suddenly, a girl enters Brewster's life, and he falls for her and from Louise's graces in one fatal stroke. From here out, he must fend for himself, innocent and alone.

It's obvious that the symbolism in this movie is about as thick as cold oatmeal. Usually this is troublesome—probably because

one has to listen to everybody else's concept of it—but here it is actually impressive. Though its symbolic meaning is made painfully clear almost from the beginning, never is it clumsily forced down one's throat. "Brewster" makes a strong, serious, almost religious statement on life that is ingeniously heightened by its wildly ironic comedy.

Altman has assembled a uniformly excellent cast to carry on his madness. Sally Kellerman, who scored as Hotlips Hoolihan in "MASH," is elegantly mysterious as Louise, and the understated role of Brewster is handled well by Bud Cort. Playing against these two subtle characters, the remaining performers are outlandishly caricatured, making for a near-perfect contrast.

It seems feelings are harder to reach through movies today than ever before. Therefore, when a film can touch more than one emotion, it must be very special. "Brewster McCloud" is special. It's the funniest sad movie I've seen this year.

During the entire first semester, each of my reviews was negative. However, by the time I started writing for the second half of the year, I had seen some good films. Therefore, this is my first favorable article. With this review, I discovered it was much easier to criticize than to praise. Still, I was thankful to see something decent for a change. I saw "Brewster McCloud" at the Capitol Theater in Little Rock.

Actor leaves audience limp

Director creates moving film

by Bernie Hargis
SIGNAL columnist

A well-bred young man from a highly cultural background gets fed up with his lofty heritage, leaves home to live the common life, then returns briefly to say "good-bye" to his dying father.

That's it—the complete plot framework of director Bob Rafelson's film, "Five Easy Pieces." However, from this skeletal frame, he and screenwriter, Adrien Joyce, have created a beautiful, moving motion picture that is quite probably the best of the year.

Rafelson exhibits an uncanny knack for capturing the essence of American life. He seems to know how to handle each scene so as to reach just the right peak of emotion at the right time. His camera can almost always be

trusted to set the exact mood needed to compliment Miss Joyce's script in which the action vaillates between the earthy inhabitants of the Texas oil belt and a refined family of classical musicians. Their talents fuse perfectly to set the simple but tasteful backdrop for this excellent film.

However, even with skilled direction and good lines, the quality of a movie always rests largely on the performers. They are the element the audience sees and consequently relates with. This is a particular triumph of "Five Easy Pieces."

In the major role of Robert Dupyea, Jack Nicholson further established his career which began so strongly in "Easy Rider." As the troubled young man who realizes the occasional artificial-

ity and futility of his aesthetic background but cannot fully leave it, he gives a staggering portrayal that should leave the audience limp.

As his Texas girlfriend, Rayette, Karen Black somehow matches him each step of the way breathing even more life into this already vital film. Playing the childish waitress who loves make-up and Tammy Wynette, she is at once funny and heartbreaking. Her performance is such a perfect contrast to Nicholson's that together they form one of the finest acting partnerships in many years.

Several smaller supporting roles are, also, portrayed excellently. Lois Smith is especially touching as Robert's homely but talented sister, and Susan Anspach is coolly refined as his

brother's finance. Even the smallest walk-on parts are cast with talented performers who usually manage to elevate the film in some minor but enriching way.

There are a few flaws, naturally. The photography goes through all the stages from grainy to over-abundantly rich causing a number of shots to clash somewhat. And occasionally some characters seem merely thrown in, having little to do with the overall work. Still these faults, though distracting are infrequent and never truly manage to spoil the film's effect.

"Five Easy Pieces" is a poignant, touching, transcendent motion picture whose form is quietly simple, but whose emotions are beautifully complex.

This review was pretty hard for me to write, because I thought it was just about the best film of the year, and I wanted to praise it without sounding too clichéd, which turned out to be a hard thing to do. I saw "Five Easy Pieces" at the Arkansas Theater in Little Rock.





Thirties comedy back

Surprise package: owl plus pussycat

by Bernie Hargis
SIGNAL columnist

Remember those wild, wacky, laugh-a-minute comedies of the thirties? You know, the ones with those great old stars like Carol Lombard, Cary Grant, Jimmy Stewart, Jean Arthur?

Well, if you don't, you must be this side of forty and without a television, because this uniquely American art form of years past has been hibernating quietly on the late show ever since William Powell, Myrna Loy, and Asta rollicked through their last "Thin Man" serial, and Ginger Rogers hung up her dancing shoes to go dramatic.

But the big sleep is over. The thirties comedy is back in a neat and nutty little surprise package called "The Owl and the Pussycat."

There are a few deviations from the old form. The dizzy society girl with a couple of zil-

*"...purple lounging
pajamas with pink
hands..."*

lion dollars has been replaced by a goofy hooker who wears purple lounging pajamas with pink hands monogrammed on each cup,

and the handsome straight man has been transformed into a wormy little book clerk with a re-

*"...she pretends to
be the sun rising
over the bed
covers..."*

cording of growling dogs to keep away intruders. Still, all the old ingredients are generally intact and the style is the same.

The success of thirties comedies usually depended on three people—the screenwriter and the male and female leads. Here, too, lies the strength of "The Owl and the Pussycat."

In writing for this film, Buck Henry has adapted the Broadway play to fit the old comedy style, bucking the currently popular trends set by writers like Neil Simon. Henry doesn't depend entirely on dialogue for his humor, but allows his characters and their situations to supply most of the laughs. The result is a screenplay similar to those once turned out by Moss Hart or Ring Lardner.

As far as the performers go, director Herbert Ross took quite

a chance on Barbara Streisand and George Segal, but it paid off handsomely. Though Streisand completely devoured the leading men in each of her three previous films, here she plays right along with Segal, sharing punch lines and even the limelight generously. And Segal, who until this time was thought of strictly as a dramatic actor slips into the comedy mold so effortlessly, it becomes immediately apparent he could become one of our most versatile performers.

The scenes these two inhabit constitute the film's greatest strength. Each gets the screen to

*"...allows his
characters and their
situations to supply
most of the
laughs..."*

himself a few times for some beautiful solo shots. Segal is hilariously charming when he mimics a television announcer using an aquarium as the set, and Streisand is both whimsical and beguiling when she pretends to be the sun rising over the bed covers.

However, it is together they come off best. They can be riotously funny as in the scene in

*"...offers no
profound solutions
to the problems
of the hour..."*

which, at the height of passion, Streisand tries to cut off the belt of Segal's bathrobe with a pair of tiny manicure scissors when she can't untie the knot. Or they can be touching as in the scene together in the bathtub when they first discover they're in love.

Still, "The Owl and the Pussycat" definitely has its problems. Several scenes, including a weak conclusion, seem disjointed and unrelated to the rest of the film; at times the stars seem overly conscious of themselves and the camera; and occasionally the script gets just downright tasteless. These distractions can't help but cast small shadows on the film's over-all effect.

Unlike most films today, "The Owl and the Pussycat" teaches no moral, sets no trends, and offers no profound solutions to the problems of the hour. In fact, all it attempts to do is entertain. But at this it is very successful.

In this critique, I tried to show the film to be entertaining without going over-board. It was a good, enjoyable picture, but was not an extremely important movie or one to be raved over. I saw "The Owl and the Pussycat" at the Capitol Theater in Little Rock.



Audience meets film;

boxoffice meets \$\$\$

Is it true love?

by Bernie Hargis
SIGNAL columnist

What can you say about a movie called "Love Story?" That people everywhere are lined up for blocks waiting to see it; that it promises to be the biggest box office gold mine since "Sound of Music;" that it is "the" movie of the year.

Yes, "Love Story" is all this—and more. It is one of the most cliched, sentimental fairy tales to hit the silver screen since the invention of sound.

How can this be? How can a film with such mammoth flaws be so widely accepted by the American public? It's simple. "Love Story" is the long-awaited return to an age that should never have been left in the first place in the eyes of most filmgoers. It is the initial step back into a world of glamorous movie stars, four-handkerchief storylines, and recurrent musical themes which signal all the important moments. So, for those who have waited patiently for a homecoming, I am glad "Love Story" is here.

You know, in a lot of ways it's not so bad. As a matter of act, director Arthur Hiller has probably accomplished just what he set out to in mounting this film. Each scene looks appropriately shellacked and glittered, with picture and settings and actors who look as if they just stepped out of fashion

magazines. However, through all this Hiller does create a beautiful mood for his two main characters. When they are on screen together, all else falls into the background, leaving only a quietly played duet. At such times as these, as in the long, silence scene in which the boy takes his young wife to the hospital, knowing it will be their last walk together, the movie is almost worthy of its success.

*"...thing that makes
me tolerate
'Love Story'..."*

The main performers are good, but they do nothing especially laudatory. I think the fitting term is that they are "appropriately attractive." Ryan O'Neal, as Oliver, plays a slightly more likeable version of his old Peyton Place Rodney Harrington; and Ali MacGraw, as Jennie, handles her role like a true movie queen, though her acting was better in "Good-bye, Columbus." Both of these are badly out-classed by John Marley's performance in a supporting role; but remember, in this movie, you look for stars, not actors.

The thing, however, that makes me merely tolerate "Love Story" instead of like it is the way it was written. I know this

seems odd, since Erich Segal converted his screenplay in to a novel which has been the No. 1 bestseller since the year one, but it is here the film fails time after time. For one thing, he is so completely unoriginal. How many times have you heard the old story of the girl from the wrong side of the tracks marrying out of her class? Or the one about the beautiful heroine dying and leaving her young lover alone? Or the one about the kid who felt he had to compete with his father? Obviously Segal heard them all, because he uses them here to form his entire plot which comes off like a garbled combination of "Kitty Foyle," "Dark Victory," and "House of Strangers." Still, his storyline is not the weakest point, his dialogue is. Never in the space of a mere ninety minutes have I heard so many graoners passed around between grown men and women. It's bad enough that every other word is "Preppy" or "Yale-ee," but when little snatches of philosophy, like "Love is never having to say you're sorry," start slipping in, take me out.

"Love Story" is occasionally good, frequently bad, but somehow neither of these terms fit. Actually, I can't think of a word that would. You'll just have to see the faces of the audience leaving the theatre to understand.

This review was a big challenge. It was everybody's favorite movie, and I knew I would be literally hated if I criticized it. Luckily, there were some things I liked about it, even though I did have to point out a number of tremendous flaws. I saw "Love Story" at the Cinema 150 in Little Rock.



It's a one-man show run by Oscar himself

The circus is coming

by Bernie Hargis
SIGNAL columnist

Guess what. A circus is coming to Hollywood, and it's got the biggest acts, the wildest freaks, and the funniest clowns this side of P. T. Barnum. And what's amazing is that it's a one-man show written, directed, produced, and starred in by a solemn little man named Oscar.

Yes, every year about this time, the Academy Awards free-for-all starts to shape up, and it's usually good for a barrel of laughs. It provides a rare chance for the unknowing public to glimpse filmdom's beautiful people groveling, sweating, and selling their souls for an eight-pound, gold-plated statuette.

Still, ridiculous though Oscar may be, he manages to throw around quite a bit of weight. As a matter of fact, it is estimated that a winning film usually adds about a million dollars to its net gross, and a top-voted actor's salary can climb as much as a quarter-million over-night.

So, the Academy Award is obviously a powerful thing. But this is really a shame, because the best film rarely wins. Just look back at some of the terrible upsets—"The Greatest Show on Earth" beat "High Noon," "An American in Paris" topped "A Streetcar Named Desire," "In the Heat of the Night" downed both "Bonnie and Clyde" and "The Graduate," and the list keeps going.

However, the show will go on, unfortunately, and one of five nominees will soon be initiated into the ranks of the sometimes illustrious past winners. Now, I wouldn't chance a guess at the new "Best Picture" for anything

— I'm still convinced they're flipping a coin, or something as ridiculous, to get a winner — but I will discuss the movies and let you draw your own conclusion.

"Five Easy Pieces" is the best of the crop. It garnered more critical acclaim than any other film of the year and has already won a few less familiar awards, including the New York Film Critics' top prize. In addition, its co-stars, director, and screenwriter are nominated in their various categories, and this should provide added strength.

"MASH," this year's only out-and-out comedy contender, is probably the most original picture among the nominees. It was well accepted by critics and audiences alike, and though its offspring "Brewster McCloud" was even better, it is an imaginative film which deserves recognition.

"Patton" boasts the best performance of the entire year, thanks to George C. Scott, who is just about the best actor around these days. Unfortunately, it has little else to brag on — the script is bad, the length oppressive —

still, it's a notch above most other films and makes for interesting viewing. However, Scott refused his own "Best Actor" nomination, calling the Oscar ceremony a "meat parade," and this could hurt even the movie's chances.

"Love Story" is undoubtedly the year's most popular picture. Though it contains flaws that are utterly monumental, it has almost a national surge of soap opera fans behind it, which could make it tough to beat. Of course, Ali MacGraw and Ryan O'Neal are also big contenders in the acting categories, and it could just turn into a clean sweep. Somehow, it seems just the type film Oscar might smile on.

"Airport" is the last and least contender. Not only is it the worst film among the nominees, it is one of the weaker efforts of the entire year. But, it sold lots of popcorn and somebody nominated it, so maybe it's got a chance. However, I think even the Academy has more taste than to waste a perfectly good piece of metal on a film like this.

Well, if you're still interested, the awards will be given out next month in Santa Monica, and you can catch the whole spectacle on T.V. Just remember, don't be too disappointed if your favorite doesn't win. After all, it's only an Oscar. Boy, what a loser.

In this article I got a chance to speak my mind about the Oscar, an utterly ridiculous award that ranks as one of my greatest peeves. Also, I did five "capsule" reviews on the nominated films.



Lots of juicy plots
in 'Little Big Man'

Tall tale entertains

by Bernie Hargis
SIGNAL columnist

Everyone today has a lot of gripes about movies, but one that seems to pop up more often than most is that there aren't any good "stories" any more. Where have all the juicy plotlines and action sequences gone?

Well, a good deal of them have gone into Arthur Penn's amazing new film, "The Little Big Man," a campfire yarn that's been stretched into such a tall tale, even the widest screen has trouble containing it.

It's not at all surprising that Arthur Penn directed this movie. As a matter of fact, I can't imagine anyone else even trying to. Penn, who has been ac-

claimed something of a cinematic genius since he made "Bonnie and Clyde," is an artist with an uncanny knack for pushing a film to the limits without ever going quite too far. "Little Big Man" is no exception. It strains everything from credibility to good taste, yet somehow comes out on top in almost all categories.

The plot is a cracker-barrel full of episodes told in flashback by 121-year-old Jack Crabbe, a white man raised by a tribe of Cheyennes during the height of the Indian wars. The entire film see-saws between his life among his own race and his adopted people, the "savages" who humbly refer to themselves merely as human beings. In action-packed detail, the story unwinds revealing the best and worst of both worlds.

In the title role of Jack Crabbe, Dustin Hoffman adds another tremendous performance to his young career which already boasts "The Graduate" and "Midnight Cowboy." In this film, the versatility of his acting style is absolutely unbelievable. One minute he is an idealistic young brave, the next a staggering drunkard, still the next a trigger-happy gunslinger. Always, his energy is boundless and his bag of acting tricks seemingly bottomless.

However, the film is not his alone. He is forced to share it from the beginning with Chief Dan George, an actual Indian chief who, in one of the greatest jobs of casting in film history, gives a dignified, touching portrayal that is an instant classic. Though it first appears he will be just another "white-man-speak-with-forked-tongue" redskin of the cigar store variety, it soon becomes obvious he is playing the Indian as he should have always been played. He is helped along considerably by some of the best lines any actor could hope for thanks to screenwriter Calder Willingham, who provides us with such gems as the old chief sadly making the statement, "There will always be white men, but there is a limited

number of human beings."

There are some other excellent features in the movie. The cinematography is superlative, the script thoroughly entertaining, and the make-up jobs as good as anything I've seen.

But of course, it has its share of problems, too. With a picture as episodic as this one, it's almost a certainty some scenes won't be as good as others, and unfortunately this is the case. Faye Dunaway's Mrs. Pendrake sequences seem a bit disjointed, as do those by Martin Balsam

as head of a crooked medicine show, and the important Little Bighorn segment is a terrific disappointment. Still, these are infrequent flaws in an otherwise fine work.

One must not get the idea however, that this film is merely a good action picture, for when the dust finally settles, it's obvious some meaningful, important things have been said and said well. This is the ultimate success of "The Little Big Man."

"...the best and
worst of both
worlds..."

This was an easy picture to review, because it was a good film and one I knew just about everyone should like. I saw "The Little Big Man" at the Capitol Theater in Little Rock.



Important pictures rate varied reviews

by Bernie Hargis
SIGNAL columnist

Since this is my last critique of the year, I find myself left with several pictures I feel are important and should be discussed. So in this issue, instead of giving merely a single extensive review, I will do three somewhat condensed ones.

"Husbands," the latest and probably best work to date by actor-director John Cassavettes, is an intriguing, powerful film that becomes so strikingly real at times, it almost makes one uncomfortable just watching it. Though it has no conventional plot organization at all, it slowly presents a collection of scenes that vividly tell the story of three friends and the changes that flood their lives upon the death of the fourth member of their group.

Cassavettes employs a number of devices in this film that are almost uniquely his own, such as semi-improvisational script and extremely long takes on almost each scene. However, one could not term "Husbands" an experimental movie at all, for he used this same style earlier in both "Shadows" and "Faces."

In the major roles, Ben Gazzara, Peter Falk, and Cassavettes, himself are magnificent, each one seeming to possess complete command and thorough understanding of his role. All three are so nearly perfect, one tends to forget they are acting, begins to think of them as real people, and finally gets hopelessly involved in their situation.

*"...vividly tell the
story of three
friends..."*

Of course, several troublesome questions pop up occasionally — one being "If this film weren't so new and different, would it be any good?" — but over all, it's a

that seemed as if they couldn't be improved upon in any way. Snowden's death sequence in the rear of a damaged plane, Yosarian's confrontation with the proprietress of a deserted bordello, and perhaps one or two

*"...scenes that plead
so well against the
insanity of war..."*

other isolated segments show possibly the most brilliant pieces of direction of the entire year.

Unfortunately, this greatness is only found in certain spots, for much of the movie is a complete failure. For one thing, almost all of the comedy sequences — which comprise a large percentage of the film — are strained, obvious, or down-right silly. However, Nichols, who is helped along beautifully by his star Alan Arkin, manages to score again and again on those few key scenes that plead so well against the insanity of war. So, while the majority of the film is somewhat wasted, that hard core of meaning is left securely in tact. For this reason alone, "Catch-22" ultimately transcends its problems and becomes one of the most significant films of the year.

A few other motion pictures had equally high aspirations, but couldn't make them work. One of the foremost of these was "WUSA," a bad movie made by a cast that generally turns out excellent work.

To be exact, it is the story of a right wing New Orleans radio station which figures tragically in the lives of several individuals, including its non-committal announcer (Paul Newman), a melancholy prostitute (Joanne Woodward), and an idealistic young social worker (Anthony Perkins.) Throughout the film, each of these seedy characters stutters, mumbles, and looks strangely out of place without his finger up his nose. Still, the stars somehow handle their vastly unattractive roles well, proving themselves highly professional. But try as they will,

they cannot save this movie. It's doomed from the start.

The story is a lot of the problem. It rambles endlessly about conservatism, liberalism, middle of the road-ism, and every other -ism, getting a little duller with each one. However, the thing that makes it so utterly unbearable is the fact that we all know from the beginning that this film is nothing more than a collection of Paul Newman's political views and that he is literally cramming them down our throats. Who cares about Butch Cassidy's outlook on politics or anything else? I'm afraid Mr. Newman, fine actor that he is, should keep his mouth shut for a change. You know, in Samson's time, the jawbone of an ass was a real killer, and "WUSA" proves that it still is.

On my last review, I wrote on three films I felt I should discuss---two good, one bad. I found the shorter reviews considerably easier to write. I saw "Husbands" and "Catch-22" at the Capitol Theater in Little Rock, and "WUSA" at the Saenger in Pine Bluff.

color:
natural and lasting
1-8x10 OIL - the most