



Theater of Cruelty

by David R. Slavitt

True Romance

Produced by Samuel Hadida,
Steve Perry, and Bill Unger

Directed by Tony Scott

Screenplay by Quentin Tarantino

Released by Warner Brothers

Hard Target

Produced by James Jacks, Sean Daniel,
Chuck Pfarrer, and Terence Chang

Directed by John Woo

Screenplay by Mr. Pfarrer

Released by Universal Pictures

Because of my enthusiasm for the verve of Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs*, I would have wanted to catch *True Romance*, for which he wrote the screenplay, even without the interestingly diverse reviews. My appetite was only further whetted by the extraordinary range of the reviewers' comments, from the enthusiasm of Janet Maslin in the *New York Times* to the all but frenzied derision of David Denby in *New York* magazine. "The unspeakable *True Romance*," he wrote, "might have been conceived during a feverish night at Miss Heidi's. Overstimulated but glazed, the picture reeks of whorishness and self-disgust; it treats the audience as if it were half dead, as if it needed to be brought twitching to life with one shock after another." This is extraordinarily exercised,

and an interesting suggestion to make about a movie of which devoutly middle-of-the-road critics like those of the *Times* and *Time* mostly approved. My curiosity was aroused.

As often happens, most of the reviewers missed what I take to be the point of the film, although Maslin and others at least had the sense to notice it was funny and stylish. What Denby just couldn't get his mind around was the notion of a violent movie that is also, fundamentally, a comedy—with all the conventions of comedy, including the peculiarly happy ending. The world, Tarantino suggests, is a cruel and dangerous place, but there are some people who are such improbable vessels of luck as to be able to defy all reasonable expectations of disaster and float like happy bubbles on the surface of a turbulent and polluted current of general nastiness. This is the cheerier flip side of the dark assumption of *Reservoir Dogs*—that no matter how carefully one may plan a crime (or, indeed, any human enterprise), fate can take over, defy all the efforts of reason and, in the most brusque and farfetched way, assert its own kind of lofty justice.

What fate can destroy, fate can also protect and reward. The two deplorable specimens of sub-humanity in *True Romance* are such thoroughly stupid losers as to approximate the holy idiots of the Russian tradition and are, however unprepossessing and debased, relatives of Prince Myshkin. Clarence Worley (Christian Slater) works in a comic-book store in Detroit and gets his odd ideas about life and art from the merchandise in the bins. Alabama Whitman (Patricia Arquette) is our narrator, whose even dimmer notions of reality are those of the romance magazines that she likes and to which the film's title refers. Essentially, we have an elaborate version of Mr. Magoo, in which two intellectually blind people stumble about, improbably spared by sheer luck from dangers of which they are not even aware but which, in any sane world, ought to destroy them.

The film makes this strange dissonance clear from the outset. We begin in a Detroit so dismal and garish as to make an Antonioni shudder. In *L'Eclisse* those barren industrial cityscapes were in a relatively forgiving black and white; here the colors of the pollution are an insupportably gaudy cyberpunk. And it is over these views of car hulks and waste-

land that we hear Alabama explain how it was here that she "found her true love."

There is, in Hollywood, the venerable convention of the cute-meet, the *inventio* for a vast number of frothy comedies. To give one simple example: the madame and the psychiatrist are next to each other in line in the complaint department of the department store where each has come to protest the delivery of the other's altogether inappropriate couch. And in the line, they get to talking, realize how much they have in common, and—we're on to Act II. In *True Romance*, we get Clarence, Sad Sack of the Western world, who is celebrating his birthday by going to a kung-fu triple feature. The bimbo spills popcorn on him, then sits down, and they get to talking. After the movie, they go for a piece of pie, talk a little more, and wind up back at his apartment. The twist is that she's a set-up, a hooker who has been bought and paid for by the proprietor of the comic-book store as a birthday present for his sad-sack employee. And the twist on the twist is that she confesses all of this to him because she is such a simpleton that she is in love with him and is "basically a monogamous person." And of course he loves her too!

What can happen to people who live their lives in total incomprehension of their surroundings? It is hopeless, or ought to be, but Tarantino's comedy demonstrates that they are a couple of Typhoid Marys—they carry an awful taint, and anyone with whom they have dealings is likely to be destroyed, but they are too stupid to be destroyed themselves. In a quixotic way—that is, both romantic and asinine—Clarence decides to pay a visit to Drexel (Gary Oldman), Alabama's pimp, so that he can "get her things." Alabama is not sure that this is so smart a plan, but she gives Clarence the address, and off he goes to certain destruction, except of course that it turns out to be Drexel's destruction. And what's more, Clarence grabs the wrong suitcase, so that he doesn't have Alabama's pitiable possessions but instead walks away with a fortune in cocaine! Now he's got some seriously bad people after him, and all Clarence has is his dim-witted determination and the encouragement and advice of a kind of guardian angel, who, of course, looks and sounds like Elvis Presley.

This is all clever enough, but what makes it truly ingenious is that the

violence of the action allows Tarantino and director Tony Scott to be as intelligent as they please without having to worry about losing their audience. The typical moviegoer is not appreciably smarter than Clarence and has an attention span that can be measured in breaths. For any moviemaker to succeed, he must contrive a way of satisfying the humanoids while offering something else to those with IQs in three digits. In *Reservoir Dogs* and here in *True Romance*, Tarantino has figured out a way of doing elegant genre pieces, serious considerations of the way things happen in the world, with enough mayhem and bloodshed to satisfy even the crudest of moviegoers. That the smarter patrons can see what he's doing only adds to their appreciation of the wit of the exercise.

As even Denby noted, a conspiratorial feeling arises between the figures on screen and the knowing observers. There are a number of truly extraordinary, nearly campy performances that involve these winks and waves, including an amazing bit by Christopher Walken as a Mafioso and Dennis Hopper as his victim. Walken demonstrates that a smile and chuckle can be every bit as menacing as a frown or a scowl, while Hopper deliberately provokes him with the suggestion that all Sicilians have black ancestors. We can read the scene clearly and understand how Hopper is trying to enrage Walken so as to get a quicker, less painful death. It's up to Walken to carry the burden of this menace, and he does so with great charm and mannerly aplomb. It's like Stanley Kubrick's demonstration in *The Shining* that brightness and light can be as frightening as the shadows and murk of con-

ventional horror flicks.

The feckless couple take their suitcase off to Los Angeles, which Scott contrives to make almost as ugly as Detroit, giving us not only the exuberant tawdriness of its motels and restaurants but colors of sky that seem positively diseased. I worried for a while that this change of locale might make for some degree of relaxation of the agreeable confinement and artifactuality of the movie, but this didn't happen. Saul Rubinek and Bronson Pinchot do small but graceful turns as a low-grade movie mogul and his lower-grade stooge to whom Clarence is trying to sell his nose candy. And the conclusion is as machine-tooled as any Feydeau farce, which is a bizarre stylistic model for a movie with such gritty and bloody substance . . . but why not? I think of how Kurosawa made *The Seven Samurai* and then saw John Sturges' exaggerated adaptation of the film, *The Magnificent Seven*, which he thought was so funny he made an exaggerated adaptation of that, which was *Yojimbo*. And the more outrageous these movies got, the darker their suggestions were about what kind of gods might be looking down and laughing at all this spectacular swordplay and strenuous gunplay.

In the end, the inevitable shoot-'em-up may involve just a few hundred pounds too many of flying feathers. We know by now what most of the falling bodies on the screen ought to have realized—that because this is farce, no one should take it personally. A severe philosophy, perhaps, but it is a lovely premise for a motion picture. This is one to catch!

John Woo's movies are also violent, and Woo has been much in the news.

This successful Hong Kong cinéaste has made his Hollywood debut with *Hard Target*, which features Jean-Claude Van Damme as a Zydeco knight errant. Here too the notion is that with enough violence on the screen to satisfy the appetites of the mob, it is possible to make other more interesting kinds of gestures, choreographing intricate balletic effects and various sorts of jokes and diversions along the way. Some of the asides are hard not to like—as when Van Damme bites the rattle off the tail of a rattle snake and then punches it to stun it so that he can leave it for one of his pursuers. But the main joke is one of self-deprecation, and, if the film persistently makes fun of itself, then it winds up making fun of its audiences, too. Woo is laughing at us, whether we laugh at his movie or not.

The story, defiantly absurd, is a slight updating and downgrading of the 1932 movie *The Most Dangerous Game*, a piece of pinko paranoia in which ruthless rich men (what other kind is there?) hunt human game. Chance Boudreaux (Van Damme) goes up against these baddies and, in a warehouse out in the bayous that just happens to be full of old Mardi Gras paraphernalia, we get a series of attacks and counterattacks, beatings, shots, and explosions that are at first strenuous enough to be lively but quickly turn repetitive and tiresome. Neither frightening nor funny, but just . . . too long. I rented *The Killer*, one of Woo's last Hong Kong carnage movies, about a cop and a killer who recognize that they have a lot in common. Its final scene, a shoot-out in a church, was a spoof not just of itself but of all movies, especially the old De Mille melodramas. In this, the not-altogether-bad bad guy resolves to sacrifice himself, if only the cop, his fraternal adversary, will promise to arrange for a surgeon to use his corneas to restore the sight of the poor blinded singer he loves, but wouldn't you know—these noble intentions are altogether frustrated when he gets shot in the eyes. Blinded and dying, he gropes along the floor for the blinded girl who is groping toward him—and they miss each other! It's so extravagant and movie-ish as to radiate a certain degree of dim charm. At least the audience isn't the only hard target, as is the case with his latest film.

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For the American Soldier Dragged Through the Streets in Somalia

October 5, 1993

by Katherine McAlpine

One more "peacekeeping mission" overturned;
one more bloody sacrifice to another
foreign war. How long before we learn
just to keep out and let them kill each other?