

## FILM

# Do low budget films have to be lousy?

Drive-ins are big business, especially in climates where they can operate all year long. They have become the training ground for young filmmakers who must work on small budgets and limited time schedules.

The normal drive-in feature is either a series of harrowing chase sequences, a horror film, or soft or hard core sex. There are also occasional left-overs; higher-priced productions that didn't sell on their first runs (like *Twilight's Last Gleaming*, which had a last gasp on the *al fresco* circuit) or productions that are being run through the last commercial wringer before being sold to TV (like *Taxi Driver*.)

Now and then a film made for the drive-in market graduates to exhibition in what are called "hard tops." (*The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* is an example.) Actually there is no reason why low-budget, action films can't be vital and interesting enough to show anywhere, but as things are now they are usually inferior in every respect.

*Black Oak Conspiracy* is typical of the genre. The film stars Jesse Vint, who also wrote it and produced it—an effort that bears superficial resemblance to Sylvester Stallone's. (Both men toughed it out alone to keep control of a script in which they believed. Unfortunately for Vint, the parallel ends there.)

The plot of *Black Oak Conspiracy* consists of elements used in film melodramas since the form came into being. The hero, in this case a stunt man, returns to his home town, uncovers a plot by evil mine owners to steal his old mother's home, sets about to foil the villains, falls for a sexy local lady, fights with his fists and some shooting irons, drives cars like crazy, and finally leaves town with the lady whose heart he has won by his good looks, loyal heart and derring-do.

The acting is ineffective. The dialogue is cliché-ridden. The editing and camera work do not improve things. And none of this can be laid to the door of a low budget. *Harlan County U.S.A.*



Black Oak's Karen Carlson

was made on a low budget too.

The trouble is that what's left of the film industry in Hollywood does not trust new ideas or unorthodox politics. It prefers to go on producing films that are "easy to market" because they are laced with cheap thrills and gratuitous violence, guaranteed to evoke visceral participation. And if *Black Oak Conspiracy* isn't enough to prove that generalization, I offer a few more examples, all seen at drive-ins within the last two weeks: *Meatcleaver Massacre*, *Tender Flesh*, *Nashville Woman* and *The Farmer*.

And north of the Mason-Dixon Line the drive-in season is just starting.

—Joe Heumann

Joe Heumann teaches media-related subjects at Eastern Illinois University and writes regularly for *In These Times*.



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## BOOKS

# Sexual rebellion is not the revolution

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**THE SEXUAL OUTLAW**

By John Rechy  
Grove Press, \$8.95

*The Sexual Outlaw* is an autobiographical treatment of gay life in Los Angeles by John Rechy, author of *City of Night*, a bold book, sensitive and infused with well-grounded rage.

Billed as a "non-fiction, with commentaries, of three days and nights in the sexual underground" the book is a collage. There are vivid descriptions of dozens of sexual encounters by a promiscuous male hustler and selections of newspaper accounts, court records and short essays that document continual brutalization of gays by the forces of law and order. The juxtaposition of outrageous assaults on gays with official reports of the escalating statistics on serious crime make the point about the effect of this kind of law enforcement.

Rechy is at his most perceptive when he examines the motivations behind these tactics, both personal (on the part of police officers with some doubts of their own masculinity) and departmental (the use of such attacks on gays to swell arrest figures). He is also aware of the symbiosis between police oppres-

sion and the subcult of sado-masochism in one segment of the gay world, arguing that gays who dress in police leathers and carry regulation handcuffs represent a turning inward of the guilt and self-hate that is the negative side of gay life.

Less perceptive is his analysis—or failure to analyze—his experience in the context of the oppressive society. By his own account, his sexual relationships, including prostitution, are governed by a complex of manipulations and power trips, with cash as the final arbiter. Not unlike heterosexual relations, and not surprising given the society in which these things occur!

One wonders at Rechy's claim that gay street life is the battleground of the sexual revolution. There is certainly rebellion in the massive affront to traditional mores. But for a revolution, even a sexual one, seeds of more humanistic alternatives must be present.

On this equation of rebelliousness with revolution—reminiscent of the more puerile proclamations of counterculturists of the '60s—Rechy's book and his argument flounders. There is a place for gay liberation in the mosaic of human liberation. But it should not spring from patterns shaped by the capitalist war of all against all.

—Stephen J. Richard

Stephen J. Richard is a writer/graduate student in Los Angeles.

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## FILM

# Scorsese scores low with film about films

NEW YORK, NEW YORK  
Directed by Martin Scorsese  
Starring Robert DeNiro and Liza Minnelli  
Screenplay by Paul Mazursky and Mardik Martin

Martin Scorsese's *New York, New York* opened with the kind of hoopla the big Apple hasn't seen for years. The director of *Mean Streets*, *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, and *Taxi Driver*, the 34-year-old prodigy of the NYU film school had made it—all the way from New York's little Italy to Hollywood, USA.

*New York, New York* is a mythic recreation of the city through the music of the late '40s and early '50s. It is a film about a genre that has fallen on bad times. It is a film that tries with only partial success to recycle old clichés for a contemporary audience. It is a big film, arresting in its energy, disappointing in what it says.

Like *Taxi Driver*, Scorsese's latest work opens on a grand scale. His vision of V-J Day and the Biltmore Hotel ballroom, recreated from newspaper footage and the set pieces of contemporary movies is panoramic. Figures pulsate to the throbs of Big Band sound, their dimensions magnified, blurred into animated and dehumanized masses, in the tickertape and jitterbugging rituals,

A recreation of the city through '40s musicals, arresting in its energy, disappointing in what it says.

Scorsese catches the frenzy of a collective orgy.

The visual texture of the '40s is created through objects photographed like museum pieces in close-up; shoes; a sax, glistening in the first moments of a euphoric high; refuse trampled and abandoned in gutters; pompadours and shoulder pads. Scorsese makes them bigger than life, symbols of an era.

Boy sax player Robert DeNiro meets girl singer, Liza Minnelli. Their marriage and divorce take place against the background of the Big Band era. The competition that develops between them and Minnelli's growing success drive them apart. As in most of Scorsese's films, the story line is weak, the plot an excuse for his visual fantasies. Indeed, the last half hour is a string of produc-

tion numbers devoid of connecting narrative.

Few of Scorsese's films are completely scripted. He relies on improvisation to evoke the patterns of everyday speech and a sense of raw authenticity. But the musicals of the '40s were famed for their quick repartee and witty one-liners. The improvised dialogue in *New York, New York* falls flat. Its endless repetitions are boring rather than clever, the comic devices silly rather than sophisticated.

The film's greatest disappointment is its characters. Liza Minnelli, as Francine, the big band singer and Judy Garland look-alike, does her best to breathe life into a role that remains a composite of its originals. Robert DeNiro as Jimmy Doyle merely repeats his mannerisms as Johnny Boy in *Mean Streets* and Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver*. Part-clown, part-crazy, he defies credibility both as a jazz artist and as a man torn by his love for a woman and his fear of her as his competitor.

Like virtually all of Scorsese's autobiographical characters, Jimmy is a bull in a china shop, his attitude that of a punk kid of the '50s seething with inchoate rage. Mistrustful of the order and respectability associated with a middle-class lifestyle, he flails irrationally at its symbols.



Liza Minnelli looking like her mother in *New York, New York*.

The most potent of these symbols—woman—becomes the butt of Scorsese's fusion of violence and machismo. In the film's most gripping scene Francine and Jimmy come to blows. Physically confined (not only are they married, but Francine is seven months pregnant), Jimmy's anger must be purged by violence.

The arresting quality of *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver* comes from the fusion of myth and the nervous energy of the New York streets. With *New York, New York* Scorsese is dealing with the simulated experience of charac-

ters whose originals existed only in film. It is a movie about other movies, true only to life as distilled on the screen. There are no mean streets, only Hollywood sets. The film abounds in cinematic references intended for insiders and film buffs only. But the larger question—what relationship a film made today bears not only to the film myths of the past but to real life then and now—is never asked.

—Lynn Garafola

Lynn Garafola reviews regularly for *In These Times*.

## All-Star(Wars) escape extravaganza

STAR WARS  
Written and Directed by George Lucas  
Production designed by John Berry  
Director of Photography, Gilbert Taylor  
Distributed by 20th-century Century Fox, rated PG

*Star Wars*, which opened in 43 key cities a little over a month ago, is racing to break all attendance records. If the decided level of audience enjoyment were measured, *Star Wars* would break those records as well. It has become a national event. Twentieth Century-Fox shares have lifted skyward on the stock market. Everybody's happy.

*Star Wars* is George Lucas' first picture since his very successful *American Graffiti* and his second sci-fi pic. It's a very grown-up little boy's space fantasy, a romantic tale told by an adult boy with his tongue in his cheek. Unlike Stanley Kubrick's *2001*, *Star Wars* is not a parable or a morality tale; nor is terror central to the theme. You are clearly meant to have a great time and not take it all too seriously.

Time takes on an elastic quality as a rolling title tells us that this is a story of a long ago time and place (the year 2728), after the galactic wars had ceased and the 'dark' times had come to a far off galaxy. Suddenly, we are streaking through space in the Starship of the Princess Leia Organa (Carrie Fisher), read the homecoming queen of Lemon Grove, California. She is on her way back to her home planet of Alderaan, carrying the secret plans of the Death Star, which



is the GHQ of the oppressing Imperial Forces of the Galaxy.

On the spaceship with the Princess are the scene-stealing stars of the show, a pair of robots named C3PO and R2-D2. C3PO looks like the Tin Woodsman of *The Wizard of Oz* except that he's golden and speaks with a British accent. Fussy and consumed with anxiety (programmed for protocol), he moves gracefully and expressively so that we identify with him very quickly. C3PO's companion, R2-D2, looks like an oversized commercial vacuum cleaner and speaks in squeaks, whistles and bleeps. He spins his top and flashes lights when his circuitry gets overheated and manages to communicate understandably in an inverted electronic language. The pair are the best comic team to come along since Laurel and Hardy or Abbott and Costello; they partake a bit of both.

C3PO and R2-D2 are machines only in the sense that they are made of metal and wiring instead of flesh, bones and blood. (Will computers eventually think and feel?) They move very independently in a landscape littered with remnants of ancient science fiction artifacts, rusting rockets, robots, skeletons of strange monsters. George Lucas is saying to us, "See, you have been here before, but wait!—I have wonderful things in store for you!" And with each innovation he unveils, the audience shrieks with delight. The more imaginative, the farther out, the greater the fun. There is a scene in an intergalactic bar where an incredible assortment of mutants (mixing animal, human and technical forms) is gathered from all over the Universe. It's a racy, dangerous place. The audience loves it and there is something ineffably satisfying in being part of an au-

Chew Bacca, the seven-foot Wookie co-pilot, is the most engaging creature since the Cowardly Lion, whom he vaguely resembles.

dience given over to "the willing suspension of disbelief" and the positive commitment to enjoyment.

The film's flesh and blood adventurers are Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill) a pure innocent youth (read farm boy), Han Solo (Harrison Ford) who is a freelance pilot in it all for the money (read itinerant cowpunch); and Ben (Obi-wan) Kenobi, played by Alec Guinness as a cross between Michaelangelo's Father God straight off the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and a Zen mystic straight off his mountain. Ben is possessed of the *force* which he passes on to Luke in due time, but not before he has dueled with the forces of evil using laser beam swords and other up-to-the-future hardware, and has himself moved over into another mode of existence.

Obi-Wan, Luke and Han Solo sally forth to do battle against the

oppressors, like Knights of the Round Table, to liberate the Princess and remove the threat of the Death Star from the Universe, Han Solo is accompanied by one of the most engaging creatures since the Cowardly Lion, whom he vaguely resembles. He is a seven-foot Wookie named Chew Bacca, a cross between Baum's lion and a bashful creature from the Planet of the Apes.

The "bad guys" are an undifferentiated set of military men (except for the Black Knight out of Tolkien). However they wield enough technical-type menace to keep us in suspense, not so much over what will become of the good guys as what will be the next miraculous effect?

It is the magic show special effects aspect that delights the audience most. When our starship goes through the galactic time-space barrier with a great sucking whoosh and the stars converge into a black hole, the entire theater goes ooooooh! At the end of the film there are more than two minutes' worth of technical credits for sound, animation, production design, costuming, etc. These folks are the ultimate stars of *Star Wars*; their achievement: two hours and three minutes of entertainment without sex or gore.

Post scriptural reservation: the WWII dogfight and strafing runs at the end of the picture are the only moments when George Lucas seemed to run thin on imagination. But why carp?

—Mavis Lyons

Mavis Lyons is the regular film reviewer of *In These Times*.