

political tendencies. Suppose peace came to Lebanon and the Palestinians there were assimilated. To complete the fairy tale, we might imagine the rest of the descendants of the Palestinian refugees living happily ever after in the affluence of the oil-rich Gulf states. We would still be left with the West Bank—and the Palestinians inside Israel's pre-1967 borders as well. Polite discourse refers to this as the "demographic" problem—meaning that the higher birth rate of the non-Jewish population could eventually produce an Arab majority no matter how the borders are drawn. The only solution, says Lilienthal, is a different kind of state.

"Washington must persuade Israel," he asserts, "through Jewish-American leadership that the State of Israel must de-Zionize by giving up its abnormal nationalism, which extends inchoate citizenship to nationals of other countries because they share a common faith." Under such a plan, borders become a secondary matter and Jewish settlements on the West Bank a natural development, in Lilienthal's view. "Whether it is called 'dismantling' or 'remantling' of the state," he asks, "what is so destructive about Jewish Israelis sharing a whole country with the original Palestinian Arab inhabitants?"

Lilienthal's is a lonely voice. But, as he shows in his book, he stands firmly in a tradition of Jewish Americans opposed to Zionism. Almost as a footnote to his historical narration, Lilienthal tells of the thirty-one prominent Jewish Americans including Adolph S. Ochs of the *New York Times* and Henry Morgenthau, Sr., who petitioned President Wilson in 1919: The World War had been won, soon Britain would receive the League of Nations mandate for Palestine, and the Zionist struggle for a Jewish state would begin in earnest. The thirty-one petitioners reminded their President that Zionism did not represent unanimous Jewish opinion. They concluded:

As to the future of Palestine, it is our fervent hope that what was once a "promised land" for the Jews may become a "land of promise" for all races and creeds, safeguarded by the League of Nations. . . . We ask that Palestine be constituted as a free and independent state, to be governed under a democratic form of government, recognizing no distinctions of creed or race or ethnic descent, and with adequate power to protect the country against oppression of any kind. We do not wish to see Palestine either now or at any time organized as a Jewish State.

F I L M

NORMA RAE, directed by Martin Ritt.

THE CHINA SYNDROME, directed by James Bridges.

Polemics and popcorn

STEPHEN HARVEY

DESPITE HOLLYWOOD'S notoriety as escapism-purveyor to the universe, there's always been a small but dogged band of moviemakers possessed of a mission—namely, to prove that it isn't enough for movies simply to move or talk; if they're going to be really worthwhile, they have to say something important as well. Actually, it's always struck me as redundant to try to infuse a film with an italicized dose of social significance, since the movies reflect the culture that spawns them, whether they intend to or not, and usually much more intriguingly when the effort doesn't show. Besides, if good intentions automatically produced high artistic achievement, then Stanley Kramer would be the greatest moviemaker the American screen has ever known.

Martin Ritt is one director who has devoted more than twenty years of work to themes of moral struggle and social uplift, and his current *Norma Rae* conforms wholly to the pattern. *Edge of the City*, his first film, was a vehicle for two young actors, John Cassavetes and Sidney Poitier, and came out four-square for racial amity and against mob manipulation of labor; a decade or so later, his *The Molly Maguires* was yet another treatment of worker unrest on an even more grandiose scale.

Yet like so many urban liberals who came of political age in the fifties, Ritt kept gazing at Dixie, the nation's then-

current moral battlefield, with mingled affection, self-righteousness, and revulsion. First came his exceedingly loose adaptations of Faulkner (*The Long Hot Summer*, *The Sound and the Fury*), all simmering passion and inbred decadence amidst the Spanish moss. Next came his tributes to the endurance of the human spirit among oppressed blacks (*Sounder*, *Conrack*) as well as poor whites (*Casey's Shadow*)—tributes filled with dismayed compassion for the ignorance and deprivation of his subjects, yet inspired by their alleged simple grandeur of spirit, so alien to those coddled, overcivilized neighbors to the north. In Ritt's sub-Mason-Dixon Line dramas, salvation comes either from the solace of strong family ties, or in the person of some idealistic, ethnically-contrasted *deus ex machina*; but, one way or another, deliverance inevitably arrives.

Sure enough, *Norma Rae* focuses on a spunky, open-hearted textile worker (Sally Field), of wayward morals and negligible education, whose platonic Pygmalion is a Jewish labor organizer named Reuben (Ron Leibman). Their joint effort to organize the cotton factory in which she works, and her own journey toward self-awareness, together give *Norma Rae* a certain topical edge. Yet since the Old South hardly serves as an instant metaphor for antediluvian squalor anymore, the movie can't help but retain a faintly anachronistic tone. (Had Ritt made *Norma Rae* fifteen years ago, and well he might have, she would probably have been black and Reuben undoubtedly a Freedom Rider, but the hero still would have opted for those same few verses of Dylan Thomas to enlighten her with, and they still wouldn't have slept together, anyway.)

ARCHAIC AND SLIGHTLY patronizing though this may all sound in rough outline, the movie possesses a genuine core of feeling that can't be denied—or easily resisted. What Ritt is really celebrating is the notion that ordinary people can display extraordinary resources when obliged to do so, and, as usual in his films, he grounds the characters in the kind of specificity of detail that springs from the "typical," and renders it individ-

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ual and persuasive. As a director, he's smart enough to realize that having an earnest message to impart is no reason not to be funny from time to time, and he's sensitive enough to tap reserves in his performers that they've rarely revealed before.

The result is that although you can see the pat resolution of the plot coming practically from the first reel change, along the way the characters keep developing in ways that trip up your expectations. You anticipate trouble when Norma Rae marries her phlegmatic good ol' boy suitor (Beau Bridges), and you get it, but Ritt brings you up short when he and Bridges unveil an intuitive sweetness about the character that undercuts the usual stereotypes. Throughout, Norma Rae's fortitude and determination may make her admirable, but it's her pragmatic coquettishness and school of hard knocks irony that make her human, and even lovable.

It's hard to think of any actress more ideally suited for such a role than Sally Field, although after she'd played three compliant playmates consecutively in Burt Reynolds movies, I was beginning to wonder if she'd ever have

the chance to prove what she's really capable of. Field has one of the most mobile, expressive faces in the movies, and with her fleshy yet vaguely haggard features, including eyes that register absolutely everything, she was born to play those working-class heroines whom Jane Fonda condescends to impersonate from time to time.

Field is expert at seasoning the role with throwaway flashes of wit ("Kuh-vetch, kuh-vetch, kuh-vetch," she drawls at Leibman after one of his hyperthyroid tirades), but she's especially gifted at enriching a scene by conveying simultaneous, conflicting strands of emotion. Planted atop a worktable, defying management to eject her, she stands rigid with resolve while her eyes dart about with fear and self-consciousness. Particularly moving is the beautifully modulated sequence when Norma Rae confesses her checkered past to her kids; here, Field handily mingles her sense of pain at the memories, her affection for the children, and a quiet matter-of-factness about the necessity of her avowal. I very much doubt there will be many performances this year as richly textured as this one.

Ritt and his scriptwriters, his frequent collaborators Irving Ravetch and Harriet Frank, Jr., do occasionally go overboard in their penchant for cute idiosyncrasies. Reuben is virtually a walking Reader's Digest condensation of *The Joys of Yiddish*, with a joky reference to hot dogs from Nathan's or fiancées named Dorothy Finkelstein. (Leibman and the cinematographer don't help matters by constantly thrusting the actor's beaky nose and well-orthodontiaed canines at you.) Ritt really falters, however, when he veers away from the specific to the general: Among a number of stilted moments, the scene in which the workers one by one shut down their machines in support of Norma Rae is so stagily cadenced that it only brings to mind the first-act finale of *The Pajama Game*. Throughout Ritt is clearly far more comfortable orchestrating the actors drafted to stand in for "real people" than in confronting the genuine articles themselves. The grit and insight personified by the title character are never quite equaled by the movie that encases her, but she and Field are enough to make it absorbing just the same.

IT'S QUITE A STYLISTIC LEAP from the low-keyed humanism of *Norma Rae* to the triphammer tempos of *The China Syndrome*, but the impulse behind the two films is the same: basically, to shape mass opinion on a hot current problem by packaging the message enticingly for apolitical moviegoers. The contrast between the two movies has a lot to do with the fact that the filmmakers involved come from two different generations. For future Ph.D.-candidate chroniclers of the seventies *Zeitgeist*, *The China Syndrome* is a textbook illustration of the way in which, after years of mutual contempt, the austere ideologues of the sixties have adapted to a less polemized climate, with the cooperation of the commercial film industry.

With Jane Fonda's participation behind as well as in front of the cameras, *The China Syndrome* was cowritten by a former documentarian named Mike Gray; his credits include *The Murder of Fred Hampton*, about an event that he actually witnessed. He, Fonda, and colleagues, most notably director James Bridges, have learned their lessons well, culling the liveliest elements from such previous political thrillers as *Z* and *All The President's Men*. Despite the ostensible magnitude of the subject



matter, the genre they've chosen to work in is melodrama unabashed—the ideological lines firmly drawn between conspiratorial villainy on one side and the impassioned pursuit of a clearly defined Truth on the other.

This time around the peril posited comes not from a Greek junta or the Republican establishment, but from the corrupt chieftains of industry who are financing a nuclear power plant that could wreak environmental damage of incalculable proportions. Instead of Woodward and Bernstein, *The China Syndrome* features one Kimberly Wells (Fonda), a newscaster perennially assigned to happy-talk human interest stories; and her cameraman (Michael Douglas), a blunt idealist contemptuous of her career-minded tact and acquiescence. While shooting a routine job they inadvertently witness a potentially disastrous accident at the local power station. Their film is immediately suppressed and the episode covered up, but eventually a dismayed insider comes through with the appalling facts. In lieu of an unseen Deep Throat, the catalyst is a very visible Jack Lemmon, as a cog in the thermonuclear machine who resents seeing the system he helped construct being misused by the greedy. From that point on, the plot crackles with chases, confrontations, and acts of sabotage, down to a breathless denouement in which virtue and venality battle it out to the finish.

Like most effective melodramas, *The China Syndrome* is concocted with painstaking symmetry. Both Lemmon and Fonda play highly motivated vassals serving industries founded on technology and dedicated to profit; the film frantically intercuts their parallel efforts to bring their employers to task, then steers their paths to converge for an ultimate act of dramatic catharsis. Not surprisingly, this movie is a showcase for the very machinery whose potency it's decrying: While the camera tracks relentlessly through the power-station control room or blinks with an assortment of simulated tv screens, the soundtrack resonates with a surfeit of convincingly dense technical lingo. Television's penchant for transforming everything up to and including hard news into show-biz is the movie's secondary target, and it's tackled via satirical subversion rather than a grim frontal attack. For all her fervent journalistic ambitions, Kimberly has been trained to fluff her hennaed locks, gloss her lips, and affix a perky smile quicker

than you can say "Minicam," and the film's last image is a malicious video sight-gag much too good to disclose.

The acting is as briskly efficient as is the director's high-tension craftsmanship. Lemmon skillfully adapts that face-creasing frenziedness of his for dramatic purposes; as for Fonda, this is less a vehicle for her than a juggernaut of a plot sweeping her along in its thrall. She responds with a limber, quick-witted turn that is a lot less overbearing than most of her recent efforts. Still, her insistence on acting out Living Civics is getting a bit wearing. Her recent brace of roles passing through egoism to conscience and commitment, at well-calibrated turns, may be a lot more heartening to watch and satisfying to perform than the succession of nubile bimbos she was once condemned to play, but ultimately her self-imposed typecasting is no less con-

fining for all that.

It would be useless to complain that *The China Syndrome* doesn't play fair with the issues, since nothing could have been farther from its intentions. The last thing Fonda, Bridges, and company wanted to do was betray even a hint to the audience that there might possibly be two sides to the matter. Ironically enough, this film superbly brings off the very thing it accuses the opposition of trying to achieve—I mean, if this isn't manipulating the media in the interests of propaganda I don't know what is. *The China Syndrome* will probably induce a thousand-fold more conversions to the cause than would a five-foot stack of sober print editorials. As a serious look at the side effects of nuclear energy it's questionable at the very least, but as canny entertainment it's one long chain reaction of excitement and suspense. □

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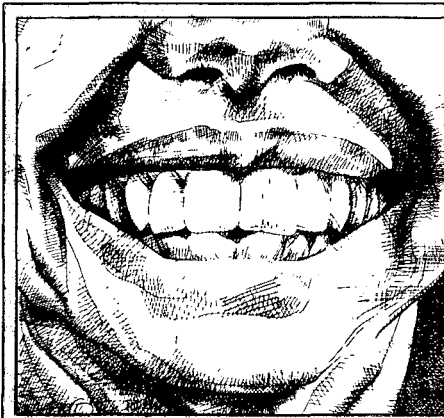
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