

# Creator: a success in spite of itself

**Creator**  
Universal Pictures  
Odeon Theatre

review by John Charles

When Peter O'Toole, as a Nobel Prize biologist, says "There are too many machines around here — we're all missing the big picture," he could be talking about the studio that issued his new movie, *Creator*.

This movie's been kicking around the studio for two years, while the top brass decided what to do with it. Their solution was typically ruthless: re-edit it so it looks like a CNIB project, design an ad campaign that totally misrepresents it, and hope for the best.

The movie is now dying at the box-office, and it deserves much better, because it's not a wacky comedy about college crazies and sex, as the previews would have you think. Nor is it a sequel to O'Toole's comedy *My Favorite Year*.

It's directed by Czech emigre Ivan Passer, who made the 1967 classic *Intimate Light* and Jeff Bridges' terrific 1981 movie *Cutter's Way*. And the film's low-keyed, bleak tone is all Passer, while the whimsy and plot is from screenwriter Jeremy Leven, who has adapted his own novel.

O'Toole plays Harry Walker, an eccentric scientist at a California university. He gets \$800,000 in funding every year for his department because he gives the funders the marvelous visionary bullshit they want to hear, but other professors resent him since his projects are unorthodox. Unorthodox indeed! He's trying to conjure up life from the preserved cells of his beloved wife Lucy, who died 30 years ago.

Enter Boris (Vincent Spano), a student who Harry spirits away from another professor to become his graduate assistant. Harry becomes Boris' guru about life and its cosmic wonders; he thinks it's wonderful Harry loved Lucy so much. Boris falls in love with a lovely girl, Barbara (Virginia Masden), and Meli (Mariel Hemingway), a 19-year-old kook, shows up and falls in love with Harry.

At times this movie threatens to become some dreadful amalgamation of *Harold and Maude* and *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, as Boris decides he wants to be just like Harry, and Harry says "I don't think the planet is ready for two of me." Learning to embrace the universe and break out of the capitalist system is what Hollywood movies love championing, while making sure it's all said in an utterly conventional way.

But Passer and Leve are up to something more thoughtful.

For just as O'Toole's frozen joylessness starts to get on your nerves — how can this guy be the spokesman for wisdom and beauty when he looks like a corpse? — Meli points out to him that in his obsession with bringing back Lucy he's making death, not life.

That's when the movie's quirky tristesse starts making sense, and an earlier moment in which Boris' father suddenly dies is seen to be part of the movie's view, not a clumsy intrusion in a farce about test tubes and getting laid.

By the movie's end we've had one rather gooey scene about the power of love, but it's done with an intensity and conviction I found gripping because the movie accepts death, and loss, and going on.

In its coupling of joy and anguish in the same frame, *Creator* recalls John Cheever's final stories and novels, which reveal the world as a treacherous place built over an

abyss, but in which you can still find moments of dizzying happiness.

The best things in *Creator* are Leven's script which has many good smart-ass lines and nearly always transforms the maudlin into something playful or even beautiful.

Spano is excellent, as is Madsen, and the way their love story evolves is surprisingly fresh and joyous. And the supporting cast is good too.

But O'Toole is not really what is needed

for Harry, and his other movie roles get in our way. His love affair with Mariel is ludicrous because he declines to act it out (his hugs with Spano have more conviction). If this had been Richard Burton's final role it would have given the movie its proper weight. But O'Toole's frail sadness is still powerful at times.

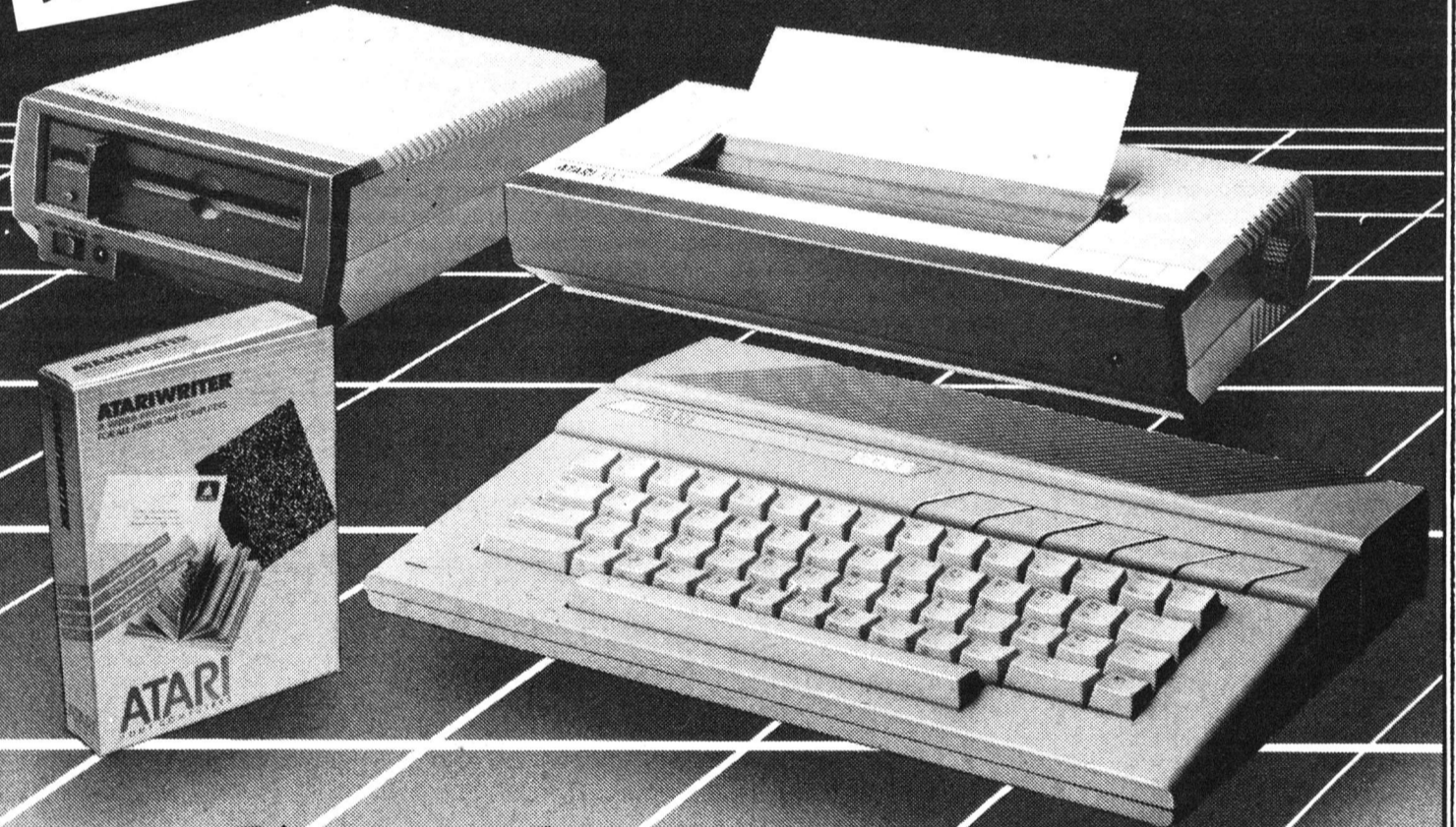
Hemingway is miscast too, although once you accept her in order to see where the movie's going she has some nice moments.

But this is a pivotal role in the film's structure and you don't get a 19-year-old earth mother just by calling Central Casting. Hemingway can't convey a sense of instinct and ripe wisdom, that's so strong it changes the picture's direction.

So, I'll admit it — you have to look past your assumptions, and O'Toole and Hemingway, and some crudely shortened scenes to find the powerful movie I saw in *Creator*. But it's still there.

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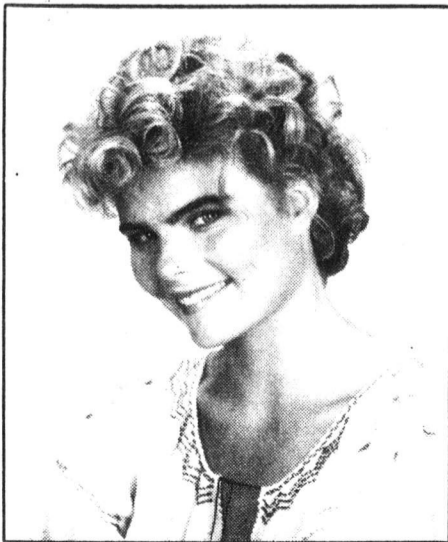
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