

# NORMA RAE an all-round success

by Glenn Walton

Some movies are a pleasure to review. Seldom does one film stand scrutiny on all of the disparate elements that go into its making and come up smelling better than **The Rose**, **Apocalypse Now**, or **Kramer vs. Kramer**, all films with their strong points.

**Norma Rae** is simply the best film I have seen this year. It concerns the arrival, in an unreconstructed Southern Baptist town, of a union organizer from New York (Ron Liebman), and his attempt to unionize the local textile mill, the town's major employer. He befriends the scrappy, exploited Norma Rae (Sally Field), who is gradually drawn into the struggle against the heavies in the plant office who oppose any form of worker control over pay scales and working conditions. Promoted by her mother's recurring deafness from the noise level on the floor, and her father's death from overwork, Norma gradually learns the lessons of developing a social consciousness.

From the beginning, the tensions and pressures to conform in small-town living are well realized in the film, and provide the human background for Norma Rae's metamorphosis from exploited labourer to agitator for worker's dignity. Norma is fired, of course, after staging an on-the-job protest that shuts down the plant, and goes to jail for a night, contracting lice and a sense of outrage. The moral victory, however, is hers, along with our sympathies. When the plant eventually unionizes, the elation on the screen fairly sweeps us up with it.

**Norma Rae's** success is due to combined excellence of direction, writing, and acting. It is no mean achievement to make a labour struggle interesting in a commercial film, but Norma Rae does just that

by keeping human interest up front, and (legitimate) political lessons second. Through them we understand Norma Rae's dilemma. She is opposed at first by her father and even her good-natured husband (Beau Bridges) who would prefer her to be a nice little wife and cook for him. We realize that is only with great courage and thought that she takes the step that will make her a jailbird and the notorious target for local gossip.

In addition, the script, to its credit, avoid sentimentalizing

Norma's relationships or the labouring life: her hands-off friendship with the union organizer, without the obligatory Hollywood romancing, is a refreshing admission of the possibility of friendship between men and women. Even the violence in the film is presented as a fact of life, and not sensationalized.

If script and direction are on target, the acting is near-perfect. Ron Liebman invests the Jewish intellectual confronting a racist townspeople with toughness and compassion. If his speech is at

times cliché-ridden, that is a reflection of his job in a society used to grandstanding from the pulpit. Beau Bridges, like his brother Jeff, has matured into a naturally engaging actor.

The film, however belongs to Norma Rae as played by Sally Field, who is absolutely perfect in her role. The temptation to play Norma Rae as suffering saint she has correctly avoided. Instead we are given a finely-controlled portrait of a tough and tender girl/woman who can yell at her kids and still love them,

who is pretty but not cloyingly so, her face with its hard, downturned lines is a blueprint for a lifetime of hard factory work. Her well-modulated accent is the instrument for Norma Rae's rage and boredom at life's insipidity. Her eyes are the beams of a flickering intelligence that gradually awakens in a body and mind that has been misused too long. They are also the signal that an actress, once tangled in the horrible cloys of television's **Flying Nun**, has arrived.

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# Tia Maria goes.

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but he does seem to have taken the funnyman's approach here and the audience lapped it up. The capacity matinee crowd, I saw it with were probably attracted by Randall in the first place, and they were desperate for whatever crumbs of laughter they could squeeze out of this sombre play. Since they so obviously want Randall to be funny, and since he appears to be unable to help himself in this respect, why fight it?

The second best thing after Neville's elegant coat and the heroine's gleaming, gold hair, no, the third best thing, is the set design by Phillip Silver. The autumn leaves strewn about the terrace in the third act said it all.