

AMERICA'S GREATEST FILM

by Stephen Scobie

Within the space of three films, Robert Altman has established himself as the major director of current American cinema.

Although MASH was not in fact Altman's first film, it was the one in which he began to establish his directorial personality. It showed his tremendous gift for creating a total community within which even the most minor character was vividly and completely alive; it showed also his ability to create a situation, or total narrative image, capable of the widest possible application, but without any sense of strain, of overobvious allegorising or inflated pretentiousness. The weaknesses of MASH lay in its rather uneven sense of humour, and in its loose, episodic structure, which prevented any serious development of its ideas.

Altman's next film, BREWSTER MACCLOUD, was a great improvement — though it was also, inexplicably, a box-office flop. Here the super-abundance of comic ideas and characters is barely held in check by a central image — the Icarus myth — which is not a static situation, as in MASH, but a narrative line which moves towards a full and satisfying climax. BREWSTER MACCLOUD, is a comic film of near-genius — its weakness is simply that there is too much in it, and some of the energy of its central images gets dissipated in the side-attractions.

But nothing in either MASH or BREWSTER MACCLOUD quite prepares one for the overwhelming greatness of MCCABE AND MRS. MILLER. Superlatives are always dangerous, but I think I would be prepared to defend the proposition that this is the greatest American movie ever made. As the old cliché goes, if you only see two films this year, see MCCABE AND MRS MILLER twice.

Again we have the total, vivid realisation of a community and all its members; again there is the effortless expansion of the image to far wider areas of significance. But this time, Altman's comedy is muted into the tragic, into an atmosphere of almost inexpressible sadness as the two central characters

become trapped within their own separate dreams. The irony of the film is that, for all its abundant sense of community, it is ultimately about its characters' isolation. Its greatness lies in the depth of emotional perception which these characters evoke.

Everything works together to produce this effect: the incredibly beautiful, muted photography; the songs of Leonard Cohen (when have pre-existing songs ever been so perfectly used in a movie?); the acting of all members of Altman's stock company who turn up in film after film; above all by the acting of the two principals (is it any accident that Warren Beatty also starred in BONNIE AND CLYDE, the only recent American

film which even begins to stand comparison with this one?)

Altman's direction is so deceptively casual and seemingly improvised that it is only on a second viewing that its absolute tightness and control become apparent. Not a shot is wasted, and the juxtapositions Altman achieves in cutting from scene to scene are consistently brilliant in their irony.

The tragedy of the characters-McCabe, fatally trapped by his own self-image and by the mystery of his encounter with a woman he cannot understand; Constance (ironically so-named) Miller, understanding so much more than she can ever see, retreating (or advancing) into the dreamworld of opium-is balanced

against the vital life of the community, just as the empty shambles of the church is balanced against the positive warmth of the whorehouse. But the false image is always stronger than the reality: McCabe is destroyed by the conception of himself fed by the fatuous and also self-deluding lawyer, and as the town rushes to save what is not worth saving, McCabe dies alone in the snow, the cold beauty of these last shots intercut with the warm glow of the abstractions inside his winter lady's eyes.

The only question left is: after a masterpiece as immense as MCCABE AND MRS. MILLER, what can Robert Altman possibly do next?

MCCABE AND MRS MILLER

I went to see McCabe and Mrs. Miller, having heard from Linda Kupecek, a U of A Fine Arts graduate who plays a whore in the film, great things concerning director Robert (MASH) Altman's charm, his ability to involve on a personal level even the smallest bit-player in his art. Watching the film, I saw Altman's charm, his sensitivity to humanity and its condition evolve into a very, very good, if not great piece of art.

With some twists and a few turns, McCabe and Mrs. Miller has the typical 'little-man-against-the-big-man' horse-opera plot. McCabe and Mrs. Miller set up a flourishing whore-house in the bush-town of Presbyterian Church. A mining company offers to buy them out. McCabe, holding out for a better offer, refuses. The company sends out its hired killers. They kill McCabe and are killed by McCabe in return.

In other words, the plot of McCabe and Mrs. Miller is superfluous. It serves purposes: To observe humanity and to formulate some kind of statement on its condition. In this respect, McCabe and Mrs. Miller is more about here and now than it is about a small bush-town at the turn of the century.

Altman's observations of humanity are founded upon a finely discerning sensibility. He responds to his setting in Northern British Columbia by carefully evoking the beauty, the underlying mystery of snow, ice and mountains. In this setting, he places the town, Presbyterian Church—a rickety bridge and a few run-down shacks. From the outside the town is grey, dead, all but overwhelmed by the chilling magnificence of the mountains. But inside, it is alive—with song, conversation, the petty

wheeling and dealing of humanity. Thus, Altman establishes man's self, he relies on his characters.

With a fine, delicate precision, Altman captures the essential humanity of even his minor characters. McCabe states that he is going to set up a whore-house so that the men will have more than "five-fingered Mary" to play with at night. A scrubby townsman attempts to duplicate the idiom, and fails miserably as "five-fingered Mary"

by W. N. Callaghan, Jr.

Resurrection badly needed

by Stephen Scobie

Gone are the days.

Once, the combination of Edgar Allen Poe and American International Pictures (James H. Nicholson and Samuel Z. Arkoff) produced some marvellous movies. But that was in the days when the credits list continued: starring Vincent Price; script by Richard Matheson; photography by Floyd Crosby; sets by Daniel Haller; directed by Roger Corman.

Alas, Corman has passed on, after the twin peaks of THE MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH and THE TOMB OF LIGEIA, to other things: to THE WILD ANGELS (the best motorcycle picture ever made); to BLOODY MAMA (banned by the Alberta censors); to GASS-S-S-S-S (banned by the distributors, who have simply not released it); to the complex and fascinating VON RICHTHOFEN AND BROWN' Corman is a great director, and under his direction the A.I.P. horror movies achieved real distinction.

Since his departure, however, the results have been more variable. Some of the old verve survived in the savage THE CONQUEROR WORM, and in Daniel Haller's neat bit of pseudo-Lovecraft, THE DUNWICH HORROR. But the real sense of metaphysical evil and the genuine Gothic obsession with death, which suffuse all Corman's movies, were missing.

Recently, A.I.P. have been trying again, resurrecting old forms (an appropriate enough kind of venture, in this genre) with THE ABOMINABLE DR PHIBES and THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE.

PHIBES (slogan, accompanying picture of man with hideous face, skull with wires sticking out: "Love means never having to say you're ugly") had the great advantage of Vincent Price in one of his finest ham performances — ascending from the cellar playing a multi-coloured organ with extravagant gestures which showed off his flowing black robe to perfection. Director Robert Fuest (previous — dubious — distinction; WUTHERING HEIGHTS) managed a fine flourish of style, setting the correct tone of extravagant outrageousness, spoiled only by a few spots of excessive gloating over gruesome deaths.

But any sense of style at all is missing from THE MURDERS IN THE RUE MORGUE, a thoroughly boring film which is, in a loose sort of a way, what this review is supposed to be about. Using a very similar plot to PHIBES (series of murders committed for revenge by character supposedly dead years before, but actually still alive, hideously disfigured and murderously ingenious) this pedestrian film plods through every tired cliché in the business — even ye gods, a dream sequence filmed in slow motion and red filter, repeated about six or seven times. The plot piles twist upon twist without ever generating either suspense of excitement; and Jason Robards (who played a splendid Al Capone in Corman's ST. VALENTINE'S DAY MASSACRE) doesn't even bother trying to act. The final allusion to THE TOMB OF LIGEIA — "The will lives on" — is merely an insult.

Resurrection is indeed badly needed: this particular coffin isn't empty, and the lid's stuck tight.

Friends -- Flops

by J.R. Thompson

Friends, a teenage love story, beigns with Michelle, a newly-orphaned country waif. She arrives in Paris, to the plaintive accompaniment of Elton John's "Friends", to live with her only surviving relative, an older cousin. Unwanted by her cousin but hotly desired by her cousin's boy friend, she meets an equally neglected "poor little rich boy" and the two "friends" take off to the South. After the usual puerile dalliance she becomes pregnant and responsibilities accrue. The teenage father, Paul, works in a vineyard and the three play house until detectives hired by Pau's father are seen waiting for him at work. The end.

As teenage romance the film succeeds, but director Gilbert tried for more. Symbolism is unexpectedly rich. For example, after meeting initially in a zoo among caged animals, the two friends settle on the sea shore where several shots of romping horses and flying herons vividly accentuate their new-found freedom. In the same vein, technology in terms of cars and telephones are forces of evil. These and other symbols illuminate what seems to be the main theme — the positive power of passive femininity.

Michelle, the archetypal mother, is

not tainted by the city as is Paul who steals cars for kicks, and she is clearly the leader in sex. She even knew, directly after making love, that she was pregnant. When Paul panicked at the moment of birth she remained calm in her suffering, and when he tried to run away, a single call from her stopped him in his tracks. Moreover, all the confidence he gained was meted out in small doses by her. It is clear that without her he will succumb to his father's will and that she will endure, whether alone or not. This much power in a fifteen year old girl is particularly striking.

The film, though, is not perfect. It is constricted by clichés, such as Paul's father, "I don't understand. He always had everything," and Paul, "I can't do any work — I'm educated." Like it or not, these are high points of humour. There is also a point where we wish that these awkward adolescents, lumbering across the tidal flats endlessly yelling "Paul" and "Michelle" would return to the city and leave the horses and birds in peace.

The film is both interesting and entertaining. The acting is uneven but the well controlled theme and exquisitely photographed scenery atone for many weaknesses.