

entertainment

Silkwood: a character study

By WILLIAM CLAIRE
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Silkwood is two movies in one. It's a multi-faceted character study of Karen Silkwood; it's also a political statement about doing what you think is right and the consequences of so doing.

In the hands of director Mike Nichols (*Who's afraid of Virginia Wolff*, *The Graduate*, *Catch-22*) and with the talented Meryl Streep as Karen, concern with how the 28-year-old plutonium plant worker behaves tends to dominate the political reality in which she became embroiled.

Karen became concerned about the health and safety standards at the Kerr-McGee Cimarron Plutonium Recycling Facility at Crescent, Okla. She died in an unexplained car crash in 1974 while attempting to expose safety hazards at that facility. The cause of her death was listed as a single-vehicle accident. However, the film clearly supports the theory that she was deliberately killed on her way to an interview with a reporter after earlier company efforts failed to discourage her investigation.

By emphasizing her motivations and in exploring Karen's personal relationships, Nichols has washed out the impact of the political statement; names-ly, workers in dangerous situation (and, by extension, the general public) will be told as little as possible for as long as possible. Then they will be lied to for as long as possible until the truth can no longer be contained.

The character of Karen, as complex and as interesting as it is, takes the film too much away from the plant and its activities. The in-plant scenes reveal the basis for her activism, all but one of her co-workers are unconcerned about the potential hazards of the plutonium and radioactivity due to their total lack of information on the subject.

Karen's union activities are bred of fear following an exposure to plutonium radiation, a process her co-

workers aptly refer to as "getting cooked".

It is not only the company that tries to manipulate Karen the plant worker to its own purposes; the union does its own manipulation of Karen the union member.

A national organizer (Ron Silver) is very interested in Karen's allegations that X-rays are being doctored to cover up production imperfections in plutonium pellets. The organizer encourages Karen to continue her investigation. A "moral imperative", he tells her; a political pitch to strengthen the union, we see.

Streep's performance is another in her series of very human portraits (*The Deer Hunter*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Sophie's Choice*). Her superior talent in transmitting feelings, the

essence of all her performances, is fundamental to presenting Karen as a real person: mother-of-three, divorced, living with two co-workers, -- one her lover and one her best friend (who happens to be a lesbian).

Nichols has always been able to coax substantial performances from his actors. This trend continues as is evidenced in the impressive portrayals by Cher as Dolly Pelliker, Karen's girl friend, and by Kurt Russell as Drew Stephens, her lover.

Cher brings a vulnerability to her role, thereby evoking sympathy for what could have been a very unlikeable character. Russell comes into his own as a serious lead actor, hinting at a potential far beyond his predominantly Walt Disney and John Carpenter background.

Other supporting performances are all carefully delineated by Nichols who has chosen his cast well; notably, Craig T. Nelson as Karen's immediate superior, and Fred Ward, Sudie Bond and E. Katherine Kerr as her co-workers.

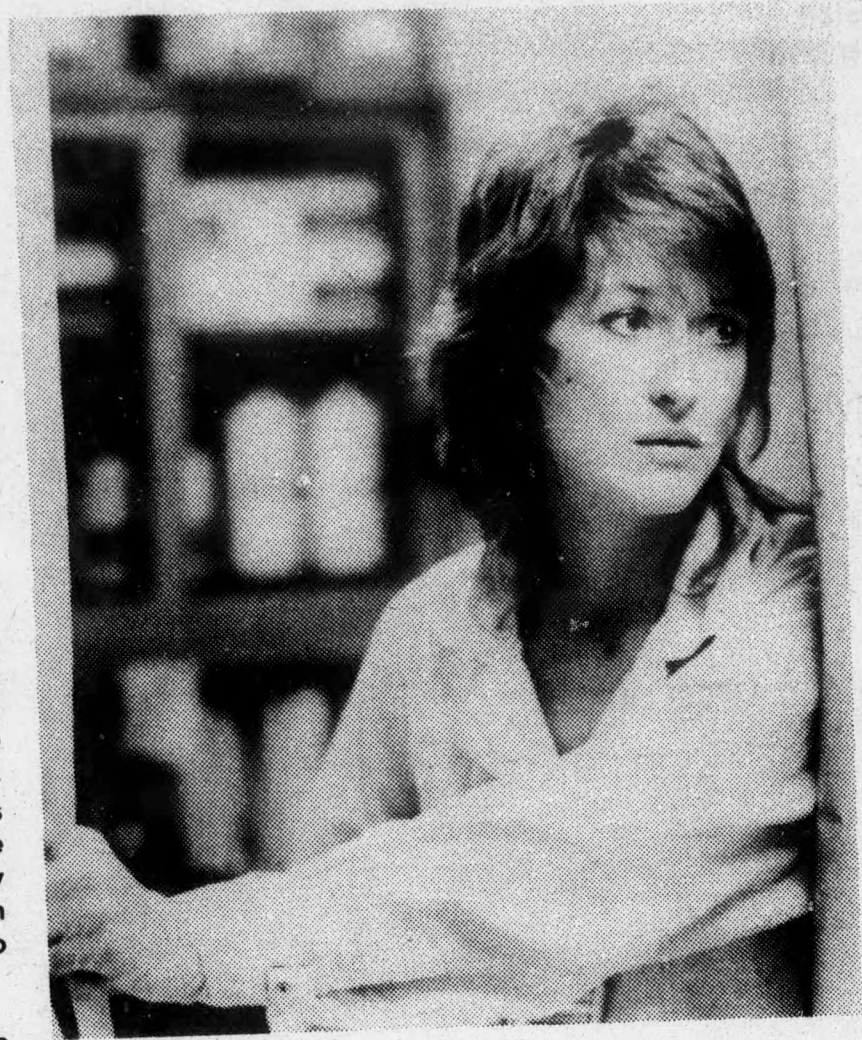
Nichols, however, has made a serious error in addition to his over-emphasis of *Silkwood*-the-person.

Toward the end of the film, he turns Karen into a martyr. This move raises Karen above her own self-perception and colours the audience's understanding of who Karen was.

Karen was an unusual woman, to be sure, out of step with her fellow plant workers. But she was not a character of mythic proportions. To assume she was bigger than life fails to acknowledge the crucial fact that she was only a pawn in a game far beyond her comprehension.

On January 11, 1984, about one month after *Silkwood* was released, her three children were awarded \$10 million in a negligence suit against Kerr-McGee. The suit contended that the company's carelessness resulted in the incident that radioactively contaminated Karen Silkwood nine days prior to her death.

In light of that decision and seeing as everyone in the audience knows she's going to die before the movie ends, it would have been nice to have learned a little more about the people who were responsible for Karen's 'contamination'.



Meryl Streep portrays plutonium plant worker Karen Silkwood who died in a mysterious car crash while attempting to expose health and safety hazards at the plant.

John Gray here Monday

John Gray, whose works include *Billy Bishop Goes to War*, *18 Wheels*, and *Rock and Roll*, will read at the University of New Brunswick March 19.

The reading will take place in the gallery of Memorial Hall at 8 p.m.. It is open to the public free of charge.

A native of Truro, now living in Vancouver, John Gray has been called "Canada's most gifted writer of musicals." He received the Governor General's Award for literature in 1981.

He was the subject of *Atlantic Insight's* cover story last August.

Billy Bishop Goes to War, written with Eric Peterson, played to sellout crowds in Vancouver before opening on Broadway to critical acclaim in 1980. It also played in London and across Canada, was filmed and broadcast on CBC television

and was published by Talonbooks in 1981.

Rock and Roll toured the Atlantic provinces last fall, appearing in Fredericton in September under the sponsorship of the UNB-STU Creative Arts Series. The rock and roll band of the musical, the Monarchs, is modelled on the legendary Lincolns of Truro with whom Gary played keyboards in the 1960s.

Gray graduated from Mount Allison University in 1968 and received a master's degree in theatre from the University of British Columbia in 1972. He helped found the experimental Tamahous Theatre in Vancouver and worked in Toronto at the Tarragon Theatre and with Paul Thompsons at Theatre Passe Muraille.

He wrote the music for Neptune Theatre's 1976 production of *Othello*. His first

major non-musical of recent years, *You Better Watch Out*, *You Better Not Die*, premiered at Neptune in December.

Strangelove Monday

Don't forget Monday night's showing of the perennial favorite, *Dr. Strangelove*, last in the mini-series of films dealing with nuclear war. Stanley Kubrick's 1964 classic stars Peter Sellers as the U.S. President who must contend with the Russians and his own political and military leaders when a fanatical general launches an A-bomb attack on the U.S.S.R.. Sellers also plays a British Captain and the mad inventor of the bomb in this black comedy which seems better with each passing year. Tilley Auditorium, Monday, March 19th at 8 p.m.; \$2.