

Film about libel libels journalism

by Peter Michalyshyn

In all my years I have seen some pretty stupid films; I've been tempted to take rather a dispassionate look and say, "perhaps it has something to do with movie-making," but that is what you might call a cop-out and avoids the indictment of the audience, the 99 per cent of the world's diverse population which prefers to sit in a theatre, abused by one's neighbour as well as the medium, instead of staying home, guarding the hearth (even if it is gas-fired) from the ravages of urban crime and immersing oneself in a good novel.

But then, if everyone was so smart, there would be no market for film reviewers, would there?

The latest stupid film I have seen was *Absence of Malice*: Paul Newman and Sally Field and the world of journalism all bundled into an intolerably ignorant 90 minutes of fake outrage and romantic schlock. It has been doing well at the box office, I'm told.

I am being somewhat petulant. After all, who with background in army medical corps went to the movie *MASH* and recognized a morsel of truth? What about *The Godfather*? *Star Wars*? Is that really how people behaved a long time ago and in a place far, far away? So why should I expect that my own profession - loosely called journalism - should deserve different treatment?

After all, we in the newspaper business all are smelly rogues, or in the words of Hildegard Johnson: "...a lot of damn buttinskis running around without a nickle in their pockets, and for what? So they hire girls and load them up with bribes and know what's going on?"

Hildegard Johnson (Rosalind Russell) is the heroine in *His Girl Friday* - the definitive newspaper film. Unlike this latest travesty, however, *His Girl Friday* was from the start a deliberate farce; *Absence of Malice* tries to be serious and thus its portrayals must be taken seriously.

Remember Janet Cooke? She was the



Are real newspaper people anything like this?

attractive, well dressed, well educated, highly ambitious black reporter for the *Washington Star* who won the coveted Pulitzer Prize for a fake story about Jimmy, the child heroin addict. That incident, occurring so soon after the Watergate witchhunt, epitomized for many North American newspaper readers the state of affairs in modern shallow, sensationalistic journalism.

Megan Carter (Sally Field) in *Absence of Malice* is not black; otherwise she is Cooke's double. She is ambitious, well-dressed and attractive, but incredibly stupid and utterly naive to the ways of respectable journalism.

Her grossest indiscretion is the misuse of confidential sources, allowing herself to be fed false information - identifying Paul Gallagher (Paul Newman)

as a suspect in a murder investigation, and particularly, her exploitation of the touching, nervous Catholic school teacher, Melinda Dillon, who tries vainly to clear Gallagher of suspicion.

To be sure, this does not even resemble any standard of real-life reporting; few in the business are so cold and heartless. The few who are, however, are always those who rate the biggest headlines.

But Carter is portrayed as but one of many. Her editor, Mac, is portrayed as the stereotyped drunk on the job. As one colleague of mine noted, he's just too well-dressed for the part. Nevertheless, listen to this tripe from him:

"People get caught up in things. Remember the woman in San Francisco who took a shot at Gerald Ford? A guy in the crowd grabbed her arm and saved the President's life. It turned out he was also gay. It's news, right? Now the whole country knows that too."

This is the editor consoling Carter after she inadvertently causes Melinda Dillon's suicide: the message - join the club, sister.

The film has some high points: Gallagher is well done by Newman, though certainly he was never intended to be a reactionary, as some critics have alleged. The lawyer in the show is a dull fellow but he gets half of the good lines, such as the memorable:

"Madam, if newspapers printed nothing but truth they never need employ attorneys." The lawyer's cynicism sets off the reporter's naivety and the combination comes somewhat closer to reality.

But not for long. Sensing perhaps they are working with weak stuff, director Sydney Pollack pulls an hombre, smart-ass assistant D.A. to wind up the film with a platitudinous speech; it is a last ditch attempt to reach out with the film's theme: just how malicious newspapers can get while still retaining absence of malice. The conclusion is dismally inadequate.

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

UNIVERSITY ORIENTATION DAYS

FEBRUARY 25 & 26, 1982

On Thursday, February 25 and Friday, February 26, the university will host 12,000 to 15,000 prospective students, counsellors, and parents at the annual University Orientation Days. Included in this event are presentations, displays, and special events sponsored by the university's facilities, departments, student service agencies, and student clubs.

In order to make University Orientation Days a success, we need students to help with the organization and set-up of the event. And, we need students to help make our guests' visit a pleasant and productive one by working in information booths, acting as hosts or hostesses at

workshops and luncheons, and to provide support services to faculty and department participants.

While University Orientation Days take place during Reading Week, we hope many students will want to assist us. Last year, more than eighty students worked in a variety of positions. And, this year, student assistants will earn \$5.21 an hour. (NOTE: A limit of 50 students will be accepted this year to work at Orientation Days.)

If you would like to help, please register your name at the reception desk of the new Student Access Centre, on the first floor of the Administration Building, by

Friday, January 27, 1982. Since only a limited number of students will be accepted this year, we advise you to register as soon as possible.

If accepted, you will be required to attend a three-hour training session. Sessions will be offered either Sunday, February 7, at 7:00 p.m. or Wednesday, February 10, at 7:00 p.m. Please indicate your preference when registering.

On a personal note, I hope many of you will register, as the students involved at last year's event found it most enjoyable.

If you have any questions, please call Bev Glover at 432-5088.