

Knocking down cardboard angels with paper demons

Witness
Paramount Pictures
Westmount

review by Gilbert Bouchard

Harrison Ford's latest vehicle *Witness* is just plain insulting. It's insulting to the Amish people whom it attempts to portray as non-technical simpletons, and it's insulting to the audience for thinking that anyone is stupid enough to swallow this kind of trash.

Witness pits North Americans' malaise with the complexity of modern living against the illusionary peace of the good old days as personified by the Amish (the Amish are a religious sect that live communally in the Eastern states and eschew all technological aids; they live almost as they did when they emigrated to the U.S. 300 years ago).

The movie's media promo packet claims: "*Witness* is the collision of two worlds — a 20th century man to whom violence is an everyday fact of life, and a pacifist society whose structures have remained rigidly unchanged since the 18th century — provides a compelling modern confrontation. [sic]"

Witness producer Ed Feldman continues in the same nauseating fashion: "I think that the Amish have found some kind of inner peace and tranquility that most of us envy in many ways."

So what Feldman and usually intelligent director Peter Weir (*Gallipoli* and *Year of Living Dangerously*) do is take this "envied" people and in a hyped-up guise of making some pseudodocumentary (that the Amish refused to help produce and have since denounced) create a fiction. They have purposely built up the Amish into a cartoon-like race to contrast Harrison Ford's superviolent "everyman".

The plot is simple. An Amish boy traveling from one Amish colony to another witnesses a brutal drug murder in the wash-

room of a train station. Ford — playing John Book, supercop — takes on the case and discovers that a fellow cop is the murderer. To protect the boy and his mother, Ford returns them to their Amish village and hides out with them. Eventually the bad cops track Ford down and he has to save the day by shooting up everything in sight.

The Amish in the movie are portrayed as being so wimpy and helpless in the shadow of Ford's superiority one wonders how they managed to survive three years let alone 300.

That's where Weir and Feldman blew it. By trying to build up Harrison Ford into a modern day superman they took the easy way out; instead of building up a character they simply built down all the characters around him. The Amish are nothing more than elaborate foils for Ford.

Did either of these men stop to think that eschewing technology and preaching non-violence do not automatically make people wimps. After all, the lack of electricity and television didn't help the victims of the inquisition or stop the revolutionary war. In fact, the Amish show amazing bit of fortitude living the way they do with some of their villages less than 60 miles from major American cities.

In dealing with exotic cultures, the tendency is always to concentrate on the dissimilarities and forget the basic human traits that all such cultures share with ours and Feldman seems incapable of seeing past the horse and buggy trappings or the religious rhetoric that the Amish so proudly flaunt.

Apart from that the film is just horrible. The acting is sub par and Ford leads the mangy pack looking like he's coming off downers or something. Weir manages to match this cracker jack acting with ace cinematography — namely fab shots of wheat waving in the wind.

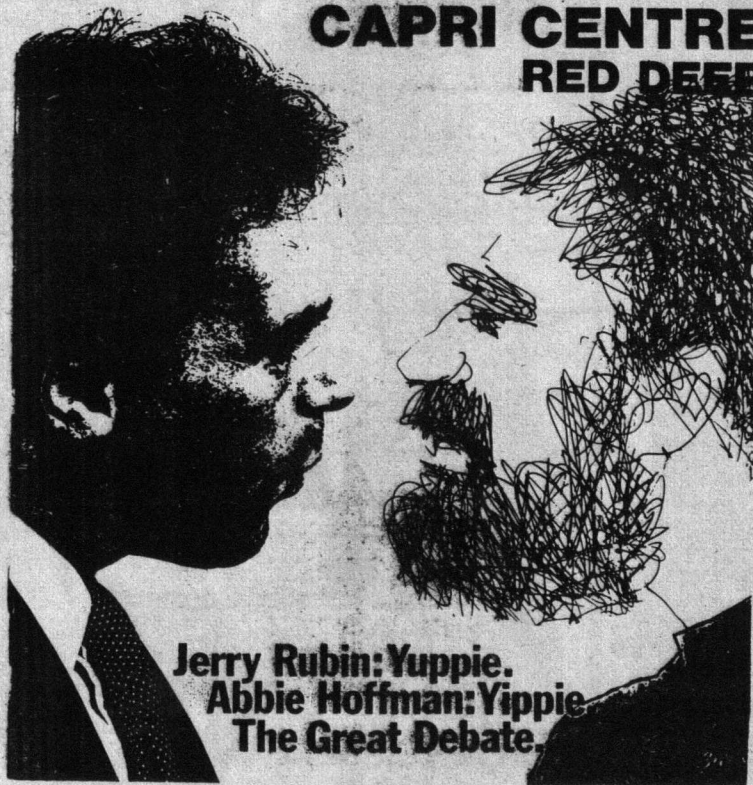
Witness is just Weir knocking down cardboard angels with paper demons and trying to make as much noise as he can.

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