Lights, Camera, Action!

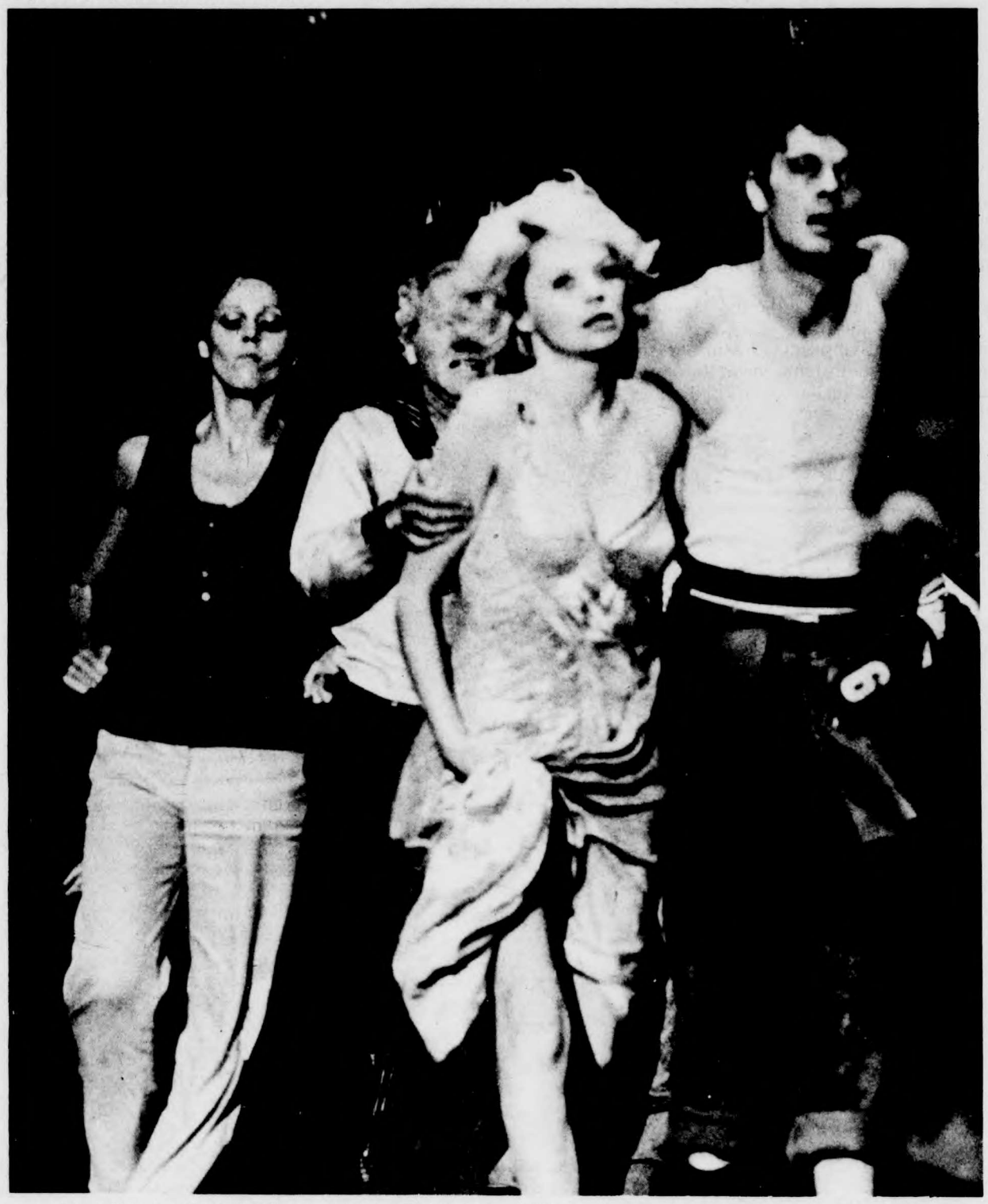
They Shoot Horses is an unsettling film

By DAN MERKUR

"Hard-boiled" is a term dreamed up in the 20s to describe the tough characters that populated the world of the private eye and their gun molls.

With the advent of the depression, hardboiled became universally applicable. The depression films — I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang, Mr. Deeds Goes to Town, My Man Godfrey, and the Gold Diggers cycle of musicals — are tough, hard-hitting subjects.

They were generally so powerful they had to be turned into comedies to be at all palatable for audiences in the 30s. Since then, as the depression recedes from recent memory into school-book history, the United States can afford to take a closer, more realistic look at what it was like.



Jane Fonda, Red Buttons, Susannah York and Michael Sarrazin in They Shoot Horses.

Kazan turned it into a melodramatic Splendor in The Grass; Penn showed the rag-time careers of Bonnie and Clyde; and now Sydney Pollack takes a look at the hard-boiled lives that constituted the marathon dance contests in They Shoot Horses, Don't They?

Based on a book written in 1935, They Shoot Horses, Don't They? is one of the most unsettling films in years.

There are no punches pulled — the audience is wound through an emotional wringer as the contestants dance for weeks on end.

The hysteria of the dancers, the unending gruelling motion is all brought to life vividly by Jane Fonda, Susannah York, Michael Sarrazin and Red Buttons.

The need to endure, to win the $1,500 prize, or just to be fed and sheltered for the duration is made strikingly real.

The movie plots the degeneration of all the characters concerned. The theme keeps stating that life is a rat race with no winners. Everybody loses. OK. So what? You've heard it 100 times before.

They Shoot Horses, Don't They is the most articulate statement of the cynic's credo I have ever experienced. As Martin Knelman of The Globe and Mail put it, Jane Fonda plays a bitchy girl who expects the worst and is never disappointed.

And she plays the part marvelously, refusing at any point to be anything nearing a likeable personality.

The 1935 book by Horace McCoy was heralded at the time of its release, and years later mentioned as one of the earliest existential statements.

In the character of Robert, played by Michael Sarrazin, the comment takes root. An aimless character, he drifts into the dance hall, into the dance with no purpose in mind. He was just there.

In the flash forward sequences, I was reminded very much of Welles' translation of The Trial to the screen, and also of a short animated subject of Kafka's The Nose. In retrospect, it figures.

Gig Young deserves special mention for the finest performance of his life as Rocky Gravo, a "yowza, yowza, yowza" emcee, who is easily the most despicable of the unlikeable crew. As the instigator of all the misery, he is as miserable as all the rest, and I suppose that explains why he is so striking.

Red Buttons is marvelous as the engaging sailor who is too old to dance so hard, but travels the marathon dance circuit anyhow in order to be fed and sheltered.

There are others who are very good, fleshing out what otherwise might have been cardboard figures, but they are too numerous to mention.

The photography by Philip Lathrop is very good, as are the costumes (Donfeld), the sets (Harry Horner), and the props (Frank McKelvey). Sydney Pollack's camera direction is good, a little trite at times, but nowhere is it as good as his dramatic coaching.

In striving for realism, the producers tracked down an old marathon champion to instruct the actors; and for the celebrity guests who attended the dance, they actually got Ruby Keeler (Warner Brothers musical star and wife of Al Jolson in the 30s) to come out on the set and take 35 years off with makeup in order to play herself.

Various scenes were obviously deleted from the final two hour plus version. Production releases stated that a scene where Bonnie Bedelia gives birth on the dance floor was intended, but it is not in the final cut.

The affairs between Sarrazin and York, and between Fonda and Young occur very suddenly after a sharp shift in the continuity, leading one to believe that there was some buildup deleted from the finished product.

For which I am very grateful. They Shoot Horses, Don't They? is the most oppressive, depressing film I can remember, and the two hours I spent watching were emotionally painful.

Mind you, I intend to see it again a few times. It was the kind of depressant you feel right for having experienced. And it is an awfully good movie.

One thing though. Don't go to see the late afternoon show. Walking in from the sunlight and out into darkness would be just too much for anyone to bear.

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Civilization film interesting

By JIM PURDY

The BBC produced a series of programs titled Civilization which were written and narrated by Kenneth Clark. The series covers the cultural history of Western civilization from the fall of the Roman Empire to the present day.

When it appeared on British television it was heralded as outstanding and it has been brought to Canada to be shown under the sponsorship of General Foods at the Ontario Science Centre.

Each weekend, on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, two consecutive programs in the series are being screened, starting last weekend and running through the end of April.

A week ago a special pre-screening Canadian premiere was held for the press and cultural elite which proved to be amusing in that York was showing the series in the library last week.

Unfortunately, publicity was minimal and most of York missed an opportunity to view this rather interesting panoramic view of the western world.

Lord Clark examines civilization by analysing the culture, particularly architecture, painting and sculpture, contemporary with the period in order to understand the thought, feelings and structure of individuals and society at that time.

Covering the whole of western civilization in 11 hours of film only supplies a general survey of the times and their works.

But Clark and the BBC have certainly pointed the way for the use of film as a means of writing history, demonstrating the superiority in many aspects of the moving image and spoken commentary over the printed word and still photographs.

The camera takes us visually all over the Western world and back and forth through time in a much more graphic fashion than a book.

The camera can float about the dome of S. Vitale in Ravenna and can cut to any number of viewpoints, from long shot to close up, each cut not only completing a broader picture but supporting the point being made by the narrator.

We are no longer confined to a series of single, static, small stills of huge architectural monuments, but free to explore the entire space of the structure, both inside and out.

Sculpture is also a three-dimensional art which the camera can move in and around to supply a better picture than the one-pose still of art books.

Art and history take on a completeness and grandeur when shown through a mobile camera and projected on a huge screen (like the one at the science centre).

Of course the series can only touch on the highlights and survey general qualities which reveal the mood and character of the time.

One is intrigued by the insights offered us by the camera and commentary, up until the end of the last episode.

The camera focuses on Lord Clark in his study where he attempts in an off-hand manner to vaguely predict the present course of Western civilization.

He confesses to be a 'stick in the mud' and then proves it by his conservative, almost reactionary analysis of the contemporary world. We can only be thankful this occurred at the end and was not allowed to interfere with the splendor of what came before.