

Hollywood soldiers vs. the real item

A Soldier's Story
Rialto Theatre

Streamers
(not currently playing)

review by Jens Andersen

Last Friday, browsing through a bin of half-price books at Woodward's, I ran across *The Rescue of Miss Yaskell* by Russell Baker for only \$7.49. Naturally I snapped it up.

A Russell Baker book is the sort of thing you want to have around 30 or 40 years from now, when your grandchildren start asking about the old days. If you find yourself too tired or inarticulate to answer (or just plain senile) you can refer them to *Miss Yaskell* instead.

Here, for instance, is Russell quoting (with approval) Fred Allen on the subject of Hollywood:

It was Fred Allen who said you could take all the sincerity in Hollywood, put it in the navel of a flea and still have room left over for six caraway seeds and an agent's heart.

This legendary insincerity shows itself in the almost complete lack of human characters or human situations in Hollywood's films. One can watch them regularly for years without encountering a person more than three microns deep, or witnessing a moment as poignant as one's first awkward adolescent kiss.

Hollywood does try, of course. Every so often the titans of Tinseltown grow tired of their outer-space gizmos, their special effects, their sexpots, their 57 varieties of macho strutting, their laughable monsters and horrors, their cheap gag-line comedy, and all the other proven money-makers. Then, vaguely aware of that mysterious and prestigious thing called art, they try to produce a

Meaningful Statement About Life.

The result is inevitably such a horrible deluge of bathos and corn syrup that well-crafted formula films such as *The Karate Kid* look like masterpieces in comparison. Think of *Ordinary People*, with its nauseating, oh-so-sensitive family and their endless pop-psychology agonizing. Think of *The Natural*, which *must* be artistic, because every half minute, regular as clockwork, Robert Redford puts a moony expression on his face and stares off into space for an eternity or two.

The Natural also earns the dubious distinction of being the only film so jam-packed with All-American hokum that it could make even Ronald Reagan vomit.

Which brings us to the latest film made in this tradition, *A Soldier's Story*. Contrary to the gushful enthusiasm of critics from the *New York Times* to the *Edmonton Sun*, the film is the usual Hollywood crap.

Here we have the pivotal character, a black master sergeant leading an all-black company stationed in the U.S. South in 1944. He is wandering back from town drunk one night when he is shot to death on the road leading into the base.

So far, no problem. But now we hit improbability #1. The Army in Washington wants to send in an investigator to dig up the facts. This decision is not explained, but it can only be because the local investigation is going nowhere fast. It is going nowhere fast because the prime suspect at this point is the Ku Klux Klan.

Under such circumstances the Army is *not* going to send in a lone black investigator, as happens in the movie. First, it is guaranteed to rile the whites, and second, the black is liable to get lynched. But this is a Hollywood movie, not reality, and melodrama is the order of the day.



Captain Davenport, the hero in *A Soldier's Story*. He triumphs over evil in the usual fashion.

Captain Davenport, the investigator, is improbability #2. Needless to say, the Hollywood imperative won't allow him to be just an average guy or even a merely exceptional guy. No, the movie defines him as the Great Ebony Hero. He is handsome, sharply dressed, brash, tough, slick, and altogether perfect. He has transcended the watermelon stereotype and achieved true liberation as John Wayne.

When Colonel Nivens, the inevitably nasty

white guy (or is it Captain Wilcox, the inevitably tactless and ineffectual white guy?) asks Davenport why he wears aviator shades, he coolly replies, "They make me look like MacArthur."

What a dude!

At the end of the film, when all the "compelling" tragedy is over, he puts a moony expression on his face (move over Robert Redford) and lets a tear trickle down his face. Like all Hollywood heroes he is issued a heart of gold as standard equipment. Verily, a tough but tender fellow! Number 8,516 in a series! Collect them all!

Implausibility #3 is the murdered Sgt. Waters. As Davenport interviews the soldiers in his company, their reminiscences show him to be a twisted nut, a black who hates Uncle Toms, Stepin Fetchits, and all such "colorful" old-fashioned negroes. "Geechies" he calls them, and his loathing for them has a literally homicidal fury. He slashed the throat of one "geechie" in the First World War. In the film he railroads another one, a soldier in the company, to jail, drives him to suicide, and inflicts innumerable other indignities on the men of his company.

None of Water's malignancy is particularly convincing. He is rationalized as a byproduct of racism, a man whose thought processes have been so distorted by oppression that he blames the "geechie" for bringing down white hatred on all blacks.

Such a psyche is plausible enough in theory, but it won't hold water (if you'll pardon the pun) in this case. The sergeant's meanness is just too extreme. Millions of negroes endure traumas as severe as his without losing their marbles. In the end he is just another standard-model Hollywood "crazy" (number 4,811 in a series).

With a cardboard hero and a cardboard villain as the two main characters, we already

continued on p. 16

Edge dull, but razor maintains cutting edge

The Razor's Edge
Columbia Pictures
Odeon Theatre

review by David Jordan

What is the first thing fans want to do when they see Bill Murray? Laugh, right? That's a mighty powerful stigma for a comedian to overcome in his bid to become a serious actor, and in *The Razor's Edge*, Bill Murray proves himself equal to the challenge.

The story is the oldest one in the history of stories: hero leaves comfortable home to battle the elements in his search for The Meaning of Life; he finds it, then returns home to save his unenlightened countrymen.

The first stage of Larry Darrell's (Bill Murray) quest is a throwaway. As Larry experien-

ces the proverbial horror of war, then comes back to forsake friends and family, we see the familiar knucklehead hamming it up on a battlefield and polo field alike. Needless to say, slapstick bungling destroys the intended effect of portraying the hero's disillusionment.

The second phase is more entertaining, if only for the scenery. But the soppy violin score, leading to the *crecendo* as Larry stands atop a Himalayan peak, presumably having found whatever he was searching for, is nauseating.

The entire movie is redeemed, though, when Larry returns to high-society Paris of the 1930's. Of course, we have Somerset Maugham to thank for the clever intermeshing of personal stories, but Murray does not discredit the original novel from which this

movie was taken.

Murray does not drop his lively persona altogether; it would be a crime if he did. He does tone down the slapstick, so that his jaunty humour fits in perfectly with the movie's plot. Larry returns as an objective observer of his friends, and it is his very humour itself that revives the decadent and depressed among them.

Not all souls are saved, though. Murray has

not come through his real-life encounters with death unscathed, and he brings some sincere understanding of pain and grief to this movie. I won't give away the plot, except to warn you not to expect a happy ending.

With some editing, this would have been a fine movie. Murray is on shaky ground in this, his first serious dramatic attempt, but he has proven that he is more than just a ham meatball.

Dull vacation

The Country Holiday
Citadel Theatre

review by Brenda Waddle

The Country Holiday, the Shctor Theatre's season opener, is one of the most vapid pieces of tripe the Citadel has tried to pass off as drama in recent memory.

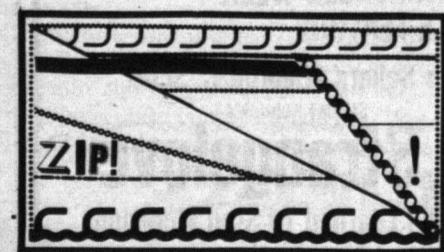
The Country Holiday is a recent adaptation of an 18th century trilogy by Carlo Goldoni. The language was a stilted attempt to mix classic, grand theatre style with modern slang. The result is neither a period play nor modern comedy, but some mess in between.

The play concerns a group of dissipated upper middle-class losers who spend almost as much time trying to keep up with their neighbours as they do avoiding their creditors. The names were harder to keep track of than in a Russian novel.

The performances were memorably bad. Almost every character was stereotyped and

predictable: the lecherous fop, the doting daddy, the horny widow. Particularly tedious was William Forrest MacDonald, who has all the stage presence of a cold piece of linguini. The play was an insult to women, who are presented as scheming, social-climbing money-grubbers. The play was not even consistent in this, however. Alison MacLeod, who played Giacinta, was a manipulative little minx in the first act, but tried to be a loving dramatic heroine in the next two acts. She just came off looking sappy.

The servants were the only characters played with any understanding or realism. Particularly entertaining was Edward Greehalgh, who played a dottering old man with a remarkable memory. Other entertaining points were the scene changes featuring bumbling, screaming servants. They were some of the few points of comedy in this wreck.



reviews by Warren Opheim

Before I begin this week's column, please notice the slightly altered logo. No longer is it "Zip Squat", but just plain "Zip". Yes, folks, Don Teplysk, the man who claimed vehemently that he was Squat has abandoned yours truly for the news department, and ultimately a front page byline. What an ego. Still, he'll be sadly missed on this page. Take it easy, Don. And keep your enthusiasm about Billy Idol, Wham! and Bruce Springfield to yourself, okay?

Kim Wilde

"The Second Time" b/w

"Lovers on a Beach" (extended versions)

MCA Import

That's right, sleepyheads, the most incredibly gorgeous lady in music is still alive and kicking, despite Capitol's dumb decision not to release any of her material domestically since her popular debut album. This 45 is the preview to her fourth album, and it should be a good one if this is any indication. "The

Second Time" is the most danceable thing she had done so far, helped along by an occasional "Blue Monday" drum beat (Bam! Bam! Bababababababam!). The b-side is also aimed straight at the dance floor, but would have been more successful as a ballad. Even though both songs clock in at over fourteen minutes in total, neither even begins to get boring, as so many dance oriented singles do. I surely hope MCA will release her new album domestically. I mean, it would be a welcome change to pay under fourteen dollars for one of her records.

Devo

Shout WEA True to their name, Devo's "music" has become less and less with each subsequent release. About as melodic as a piano tuner at work.

Tears for Fears

Tears for Fears

Vertigo/Polygram

Oo. This is not one bit like *The Hurting*, their debut album. It seems they've jumped on the disco/synth/scratch/rap/funk/ bandwagon. There are three versions of the single "Mothers Talk" with one under the pseudonym "The Beat of the Drum". I despised it on first listen, but it sank in more and more each time. My only major complaint is directed to the fellow who has an incredible urge to repeat James Brown's name seven hundred eighty-two times. Yup, you can change, as they one sang. Breakdancers, look no further.



Actor lunges, but comedy misses the mark in *A Country Holiday*.