



Lights, Camera, Action!

Anyone who can make MASH and Brewster McCloud in the same year is definitely someone to make you sit up and take notice. Not to say the films are identical or even similar, merely to say there is brilliance to Robert Altman.

America's greatest critics have always been its satirists, perhaps because America's greatest fault has been to take itself too seriously. At least as far as the cinema is concerned, of recent years good satirists have been very scarce. The art of comedy seems to be slowly being lost. Fortunately for us there is Robert Altman, definitely the best since Preston Sturges' days at Paramount in the early forties.

While MASH concerned itself with showing the perversity of all humour when considered next the grim actuality of life and death as evidenced in war, Brewster McCloud is a beautifully drawn allegory about human aspirations and ideals, which transcends the humour of its telling and becomes a tender, frail, touching, lyrical, powerful, moving, magnificent tragedy of the first water.

Brewster McCloud is a boy whose purpose is to fly. Like the artist whose need, compulsion, talent, ability, vocation and ultimately whose meaning in life is to create, Brewster McCloud flies. Flying his passion and his sole validity. In order to fly he will steal, murder and subject himself to vigorous discipline (miserable living conditions, strict diet, celibacy, hermitage). To a degree he is a monomaniac, yet his singleness of purpose is forgivable. For him, only flying is truly worthwhile, for flying allows him to transcend the mundanity of life. In flying his life gains meaning, and for him it is a higher vocation, as much a "calling" as a priest's, a writer's a painter's, or indeed a film maker such as Robert Altman's.

Necessarily he is doomed to failure from the outset, for Bruster McCloud is as human, and as fallible, as all of us. Yet the aspiration to greatness, the attempt at true fulfillment, is the stuff tragedies are made of.

While getting around to a statement of such magnitude, Altman proves himself a considerable iconoclast, ruthlessly, humorously destroying such American values as momism, cops, politicians, the "lone wolf, super cool" detective, the American woman, the Houston Astrodome, sightseers, tourist guides, security guards, football, and yes, even the obligatory movie chase. In their place he leaves us the circus; a beautiful quest after honour, integrity and a meaningful fulfillment; and Sally Kellerman (the not really a blonde in MASH) as a guardian angel. Interestingly, at the film's beginning Altman kills off Margaret Hamilton, who came out of retirement to sing the anthem in a red, white and blue outfit before a ball game in the dome. You will remember her as the All-America Wicked Witch of the West out after little Dorothy from Kansas' ruby slippers in America's favourite fairy story, The Wizard of Oz. A fitting touch for an idol smasher.

Bud Cort plays Bruster McCloud with such ability and quality that after you see the film you will no longer be asking "Who's Bud Cort?" You'll know. Others — Rene Auberjonois (Dago Red in MASH), John Schuck (Painless Pole), Michael Murphy (Me Lay, You Lay?) — are sure to be remembered fondly. As in MASH, the quality of the acting is very, very fine.

Technically the flaws are few — instances of poor continuity, the odd bit of bad composition — but nothing major. The film's only serious problem is that it attempts too much. So many gags are thrown away (while others are zoomed in upon) that one tends to overlook the essential story, which is brilliant, in order to concentrate on the throwaways, which are not. Nevertheless, Bruster McCloud is not a film to miss.

It is not a film likely to have huge mass appeal, firstly because it is a caustic blast at much that Amerika holds dear, secondly because it is an incredibly cerebral allegory, and lastly because the tragedy is cataclysmic and shattering once the allegory is unravelled. Which, by my code of aesthetics, makes for brilliant achievement.

The other film that I saw that I think is really worth anyone's seeing is Rio Lobo, which is (don't groan) John Wayne's latest oater, only this one was made by Howard Hawks, who, to set things straight, was a long time buddy of William Faulkner, going back to their WWI barn-storming flying days; who made To Have and Have Not (with Bogart and Bacall) on a bet with Hemingway that a great film could be made from his worst book; who even once threw a couple of Capone gunmen off the set of Scarface when they tried to scare him off the project; and who flinches whenever a prop gun goes off on the set.

The essence of the Hemingway-Hawks school of storytelling is to see how a certain sort of people (their sort) reacts under extreme emotional stress. The action settings — the western, war gangsterism, bullfights, big game hunts — are favourites, because there can be no greater drama, no greater stress than when death is ever possible.

The finality of sudden death makes one live all the more keenly, and so the men and women of the Hawks-Hemingway world are avid sensualists concerned greatly with sex, both with the sexual act itself and with all its manifestations, which for the Duke is to be heroic, to swagger, and at this point in his life, to graciously be a dirty old man. The women that populate this world are all gorgeous, and practical enough to be willing to be seduced in a minute and a half.

Often this philosophy of extreme pragmatism, of living to the fullest while one can, of valuing almost exclusively the animalistic values of beauty, strength, physical abilities, courage and practically applied intelligence, of honouring integrity and honesty, and of downgrading non-practicable intellectualization (which lets out the academic world, all right) is mistakenly called existentialism, which is to deny that these characters are romantics in the extreme, and are only possible through being physically capable of making their world live up to their romantic notions. Hence these people aspire to heroics, because for them, heroes are possible, sometimes even commonplace.

Of course Howard Hawks would be the last man to concern himself with this sort of analysis. After all, he is a romantic at the very top of a profession most people view romantically, and so his philosophy holds for him, without his having to worry about it. He just makes his pictures, great shoot 'em ups, full of visual beauty, excitement, drama, great lines, first-rate action, John Wayne and the wide open spaces. To anyone else, however, the films can stand serious study as well.

There is a great story about Hawks in Africa making Hatari, or rather, not making Hatari because he was enjoying being in Africa, when his producer cabled him asking whether anything could be done to speed up shooting. Hawks wired back to the effect of "Have a herd of 600 elephants stampede at 6 a.m. from left to right with Mount Kilimanjaro in the background."

— Dan Merkur

Superstar: mystic rock-opera

By BRIAN PEARL

Released in time to be a Christmas gift under thousands of freaky evergreens, the rock-opera Jesus Christ, Superstar is a highly polished, professional technical effort which, unfortunately, lacks the organizing genius of a brilliant composer. The creators of the opera, or rather those responsible for it, are Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice, two itinerant musicians who, intrigued by the success of Tommy by The Who earlier in the year and wishing to find themselves a bag, decided to write and produce a rock opera either on the Cuban Missile Crisis or the Gospels. However they made their choice (by tossing the I Ching, one hopes) Superstar was recorded in England under the aegis of Decca records, producers and generous profit-makers of the aforementioned Tommy.

The two-album set has some good music and some good lyrics, and occasionally, the two occur together. The opening song, Heaven on Their Minds is very much the best on the album for a number of reasons. First of all, the song works extremely well as the introduction to the opera and its central character, Judas Iscariot. For those of you who think Jesus is the central figure, guess again. Judas is the focus of attention far more often than Jesus, and by the end of the opera, I really came to understand the motives of the self-important, cynical, socially conscience-stricken betrayer of that hero of millions.

Jesus is an enigmatic, aloof and prophetic figure who lacks flesh and blood because of the author's insistence that he be the figure of awesome proportions at the centre of the actions. What happens instead is a ghost-like Christ that nobody really knows, not even Mary Magdalene.

The performers are all from the better British rock bands, like Deep Purple, the Joe Cocker Greaseband and many others. They play competently, and sometimes they seem to be inspired by the music, but the lack of a brilliant composer really limits their efforts to backing the singers, who have to carry the show. The singers are also established musicians with professional groups, but I can't tell you where they all come from, just that they're all pretty good. Fortunately, Murray Head and Ian Gillan, who sing the roles of Judas and Jesus using all their considerable talents, carry the plot, which doesn't need much support anyway. But what does need support in the opera is the authors' sketchy ideas about the real nature of Jesus Christ and the translation of an ancient mass phenomenon into modern terms. The result is instant cliché. Calling Jesus a Superstar is a ridiculous attempt to make mundane and merely popular that which was, and is, deeply spiritual and supernatural.

The production itself is a gorgeous recording. The mixing was done with care and finesse and the result is a sound which is clear and well-balanced. Superstar is an unnecessary album-Rock music and rock music fans could easily live without it. The new rock opera contributes little to the genre it claims to belong to and the whole thing smells of cultural rip-off, frankly.



Winter pop and football pop

By STEVEN DAVEY

As a very stoned crowd of 20,000 screamed its approval, Johnny Winter opened the door to 1971 with a roaring version of "Jumpin' Jack Flash" at Maple Leaf Gardens, New Year's Eve. Backed by Remnants of the McCoys (yes, "Hang On Sloopy"!), Winter fused Robert Johnson and Little Richard into a very exciting band — hardly the style he rose to fame with. Stalking the stage like a berserk praying mantis, Johnny battled with second guitarist Rick Zerringer (who almost stole the show!) through Jerry Lee Lewis' "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On" as Zerringer wrung soaring note after note from his guitar. Unfortunately, he was in total darkness, as the man running the spotlight assumed it was Johnny a-picking, while Johnny pointed at Zerringer.

After a rousing encore of "Johnny Be Good" Winter introduced Jerry Jackson, the vocalist from Johnny's brother, Edgar's, band. This "special treat" turned out to be a particularly bland 12 bar followed by the ridiculous "Turn On Your Love Light". This might have wowed the kids at the Club 888, but it left the Garden's audience dead. Thus exits Johnny Winter And.

The remainder of the show was predictable. Steel River were all right. Their opening was tremendous, but it was downhill from there.

Chilliwack displayed their virtuosity again. Especially good was organist/pianist/harpist/flutist/saxophonist Claire Lawrence. Their standard, "Rain-o", was widely remembered and accepted. However, after an hour of one chord Indian chants, their performance was waning.

Chilliwack are capable of writing far better material than what they have been giving us lately. Chilliwack are still Canada's most promising band, but I'd like to hear something new.

The James Gang were loud. That's about all — just loud. During their set they sounded exactly like the Yardbirds, Led Zeppelin, the Who, Love Sculpture (good heavens!), the Buffalo Springfield, and even Grand Funk. Their guitarist, Joe Walsh's amplifier gave the best performance of the evening. Every solo was bombarded in reverb and wah-wah. Their amps were even picking up CHUM-FM! They were diverting, in a way.

Poco "missed a late flight out of Frisco" and did not appear.

Rare Earth wore the latest Carnaby clothes and are from Detroit. That about sums it up. Very psychedelic.

Sha Na Na performed their inevitable teen-age antics. They may be amusing the first time, but not the second. Sha Na Na are now the mandatory cliché group to get that old Woodstock feeling.

It was now 4:30 am and a long way home.

The "specially designed sound system" was an improvement but the acoustics in the Gardens are still identical to those in the Bloor subway station. The "film tributes" to Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix were merely clips from "Monteray Pop". It was interesting to see it again and filled the gaps between sets nicely. Applause marked Joplin and Hendrix's spots, as well as the Who's. (During jazzman Hugh Masekela's set, a girl beside me shrieked, "It's Santana!" Oh well).

A good time was had by all, and although it lacked the nostalgia of

sitting on six square inches of floor in the Rock Pile watching Alice Cooper for the millionth time, it proved a far more interesting New Year's Eve.

A completely different type of extravaganza took place in Pasadena, California on New Year's Day. Yes gang, the Rose Bowl!

The highlight of the game was the half-time show. The University of Ohio's marching band opened with "Thus Sprake Zarathustra" from "2001" fame. Then, they strutted into "Lucretia MacEvil". Needless, to say it never sounded better. I was anxiously awaiting the "Lucy you're so damned bad" part but they did not get that far. Cute.

Stanford College's band is very socially aware. Before a throng of 106,000 football fans they spelt out the world's problems in six minutes. The garb was "quite with it" (the boys dressed as "hippies") and the tunes — outasite! As the band formed a giant nipple, they squeaked "Keep the Customer Satisfied". Get it? The announcer muttered something about birth control, as the kids bounced into "Midnight Hour". By this time the "hippies" were getting fairly frenzied and launched into the finale from "Tommy". "We're Not Gonna Take It". Particularly moving was the "See Me Feel Me" passage. The cheerleaders had me on the verge of tears. It was beautiful.

Your observer sees quite a future for this new trend in Pop music. It's simple actually. Some wise record executive combined every teen-ager's favourite interests — football and rock and roll! If only we could talk the Yeomen into singing a medley from "Hair" at half-time, we'd have it made! Vibe those digs, Tom.