

Warm-hearted and amusing but

Conrack offers human relations without sting



Conrack is a gently amusing film, but has an annoying habit of pulling all its punches.

Pat Conroy, a hip white teacher, is assigned to a small island off the coast of South Carolina to teach a class of

semi-illiterate black kids. Before long he meets a madman with a blind hatred for white men, and learns that the woman principal of his school hates his guts.

So far, so good, and a chance for some conflict. But the kids turn out to be as homogenized and agreeable as the Trapp Family singers; the madman (Paul Winfield, from Sounder) offers Conroy bootleg whiskey in exchange for readin' and writin'

lessons; and even the woman principal eventually melts.

When, in one of the film's most grabbing sequences, a child is pulled out of the water during a fishing junket, the incident merely provides Conroy with an excuse to teach the kids how to swim.

The class is dumbly cute, mispronouncing the teacher's name as Conrack, and following him so willingly on impromptu nature tours that you

half expect them to sing Do Re Mi. It's too facile to call Conrack a reverse Sir With Love, but it's worth noting that Conrack doesn't even have the initial teacher-student conflict of that film.

Conrack is based on the autobiography of a real Pat Conroy, and on that level the film is quite enjoyable. Jon Voigt, as Conroy, turns in an energetic and lusty performance, and his rapport with the kids gives the

film its winning personality.

But even the book itself has been toned down; in real life, the principal never mellowed, and actually testified against Conroy to get him out of the school.

Conrack is soft, sudsily entertaining family fare, a classification generally used for Walt Disney cream puff features. But despite episodes like Conroy rocking a kid in his arms to the strains of Brahms' Lullaby, Conrack avoids the saccharine coating of the Disney films.

No tension, but the hour and a half rolls by easily enough.

Sight and Sound

Woody Allen plays it again, Sam

Woody Allen watches Casablanca until it comes out of his libido. Winters screens Play It Again, Sam, a hilarious comedy, Friday and Sunday at 8 p.m. in Curtis LH-I, for \$1.25 general, \$1 Winters. Allen, as a timid movie buff tutored in his fantasies by the shade of Humphrey Bogart, tries miserably to seduce a series of blind dates after his wife leaves him. Diane Keaton, seen in Sleeper, is one of the dates.

Midnight Cowboy rides in Bethune

As the strains of a harmonica fade away, Jon Voigt hits the big town of New York in Midnight Cowboy. New York hits back. Dustin Hoffman plays Ratso Rizzo ("don't call me Ratso") and John (Darling) Schlesinger directs, at 8:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday in Curtis LH-L, for \$1.25 general, \$1 for Bethune students. And next Thursday at 2 p.m. for \$1.25 in Curtis LH-L, Bethune presents, due to popular demand, A Clockwork Orange.

Snakes, streaks in Apple Tree

The Apple Tree, a one act musical comedy, is being presented by the York Masquers this Friday and Saturday in Stong Theatre at 8:30 p.m., for \$1 for students and \$1.50 general. The play is a complete rip-off from Genesis, complete with music, dancing and a mini streak act. The audience becomes involved with conflicts which arise from the meeting of man and woman. "If 'tear jerker' musical comedies are your schtick," write the Masquers, "forget that essay that was due last week and come to see The Apple Tree." Tickets are on sale daily in the Stong cafeteria. Call 667-3635 for further info.

Gamble with a dog raked in the receipts

After years of directing rough pictures like The Sound and the Fury, Hud, The Brotherhood and The Molly Maguires, Martin Ritt decided to gamble on a tiny, warm-hearted family picture about a black sharecropper family and their dog.

The film was Sounder, and the gamble paid off.

"I was convinced no-one would come to see the film, with the general addiction to sex and violence in movies," director Ritt said last Thursday at a Curtis screening of his new film, Conrack.

"But I was wrong. Until I did Sounder, I was a hard-nosed, tough American director. Sounder changed my image, and gave me the money to make Conrack."

He had originally planned to shoot Sounder in Georgia, but after being treated badly by the "local gentry", he filmed it in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The governor of Georgia, hearing about this, invited Ritt back to Georgia to shoot Conrack, and even lined up 400 kids to audition for the parts of 21 schoolchildren.

"The kids had never heard of Jon

Voigt, or Paul Newman, or Sydney Poitier," said Ritt.

"The only national figure they knew was Flip Wilson. When I had them audition, I saw 400 versions of Geraldine.

"And when I asked them to sing, they all sang the title song Ben from Willard."

The filming took 40 days at a \$2 million budget in 95 per cent humidity, with mosquitos dive-bombing the crew. And one devoutly religious girl, whom Ritt called "a perfect actress", quit the picture because of its occasional rough language.

"I grew to love most of the kids," said Ritt. "Some of them were terrible pains in the ass, but some were terribly incandescent."

"The problem was that they could never match action on anything. We had to get each scene on the first take."

Ritt, whose other past films include Hombre. The Spy Who Came in from the Cold and Pete 'n' Tillie, is working on a new "violent, brutal film" called First Blood.

Stop frame ace

Norman McLaren, the Canadian animator who has won international recognition both for himself and for the National Film Board over the past 30 years, comes next Thursday evening to Curtis LH-L at 7:30 p.m. for a personal retrospective of his films.

McLaren, a brilliant and fanciful innovator who has anticipated many techniques of film animation including hand-drawn design on film, synthetic sound, stop-frame and optical printing processes of great sophistication, and "pixillated" single-frame human movement, did much to establish a Canadian identity in art films as well as a worldwide reputation for NFB productions.

The presentation will review his film ideas and inventions, including recent work this year with the two dancers David and Anne-Marie Holmes.

STAFF MEETING TODAY 4 p.m.

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