

Hollywood's attempt at self-criticism is worth seeing in "Pennies from Heaven"

by Ken Burke

Hollywood has always been famous for baptising itself in its own mythology, but only once in a while will people strike out at the illusions it perpetuates. And the very last place I expected to find a strong criticism of the nature of movies was in an MGM musical, MGM having been one of the great bastions of capitalist illusionism during the Great Depression with Busby Berkely & Co.. But about halfway through **Pennies From Heaven**, when I figured out just what the hell was going on, I felt a lot of admiration for the people who had the guts to make the film what it is - a big-budget musical that absolutely seethes with bitterness and frustration towards the American Dream and its main disciples, the entertainment industry. Too bad the film is also a failure overall.

Even before I get a chance to explain that last sentence, I want you to know that it in no way should stop you from going to see the movie - it's worth seeing for what it tries to do, and for being genuinely experimental in an age in which it's radical for a Hollywood film to not cannibalize the ghosts of box-offices past. The film links the

bleak reality of the Depression years with the shiny optimism of the songs and movies of the period and comes out implying those folks were cheated and lied to, just as we are by our escapist alternatives. In all of the huge production numbers there's something not quite right. At first, it seemed as if they were not done well, but I soon saw that there wasn't meant to be joy in these musical numbers - they represent the desparate, bitter characters' placing what hope they had left into futile and unreachable dreams.

The problem is, that for the film to work, it should have linked a realistic, depressing story to the overexuberant set pieces of the characters' fantasies, instead of the melodramatic tale that the movie used. I have nothing but respect for what director Herbert Ross did with the screenplay he was given, as it was Dennis Potter's writing which was at fault. Potter tried to over-do the metaphor in the film by deciding to use huge chunks of 30's melodramas for the plot, including all the cliched dialogue that is our cherished legacy. And, as anyone who's ever attempted to imitate Harold Pinter knows, it



takes a very, very light hand to wield a cliché well. In the case of this movie, some of the most serious and important scenes were trivialized by dumb, hachneyed speech. In order for the audience (me, at least) to feel

anything for the characters, they should exist on one level of reality, instead of none. If it was Potter's intention to suggest that these people were so caught up in the myth that reality was indeed nothing for them (which

I do think was the purpose), then that still doesn't excuse the amount of bored, shifting around in my seat that the film provoked.

By now, you must have **continued on page 13**

BOOGIE WITH THE BLUES

Downchild Blues Band

Dutch Masood Blues Band

WATER STREET BLUES BAND

John Logan & the F-Tones

- Saturday, Jan. 9
- Adm. \$4.50
- 8:30-1:00 am
- Dal SUB

What's \$4.50 Worth These Days?

- A chance to boogie with some of the best blues bands Canada has to offer.
- Four Great Bands at the price of one anywhere else in the city.
- An opportunity to start the year with a great party in your own Student Union Building.

