



Lights, Camera, Action!

Finest calibre hilarious black comedy

MASH caters to your antiwar sentiments

By DAN MERKUR

The American war film was born in the middle of World War 1, and what to do with it during peacetime has puzzled Hollywood ever since. By the very nature of the medium, film glamorizes its subject matter, which is all very fine for rah-rah John Wayne battle epics, but makes anything else nigh on impossible.

An antiwar film is impossible by definition. Film glamorizes. The "antiwar" themes of *The Big Parade* and *All Quiet on the Western Front* have less to do with war and more with camaraderie ("Truer love hath no man..."). The films are first rate melodramas, down to the emotionally charged shot of Lew Ayres reaching for a butterfly as he gets his. The tragedy of war here is what it prevents men from doing otherwise.

There was a series of antiwar action dramas in the thirties — *The Dawn Patrol*, *The Road to Glory*, *The Eagle and the Hawk* — that centred on the pressures of command, of ordering men to their deaths. These films were action dramas that presupposed war is hell, but never bothered to reason why.

World War II solved the problem for a time, and from 1938 until 1946, the closest thing to antiwar statements were the grimly deterministic *Story of G.I. Joe*, and *A Walk in the Sun*.

Since then, we've been told war is absurdly silly (*How I Won the War*), war is grotesque (*The War Game*), and war is not what politicians think (*Oh, What a Lovely War*). But the films fail — the first due to frivolity, the second because of obvious fakery, and the third owing to ponderous length. The effective antiwar statement has yet to be made.

Over the years, though, a strange element has crept into the war film. Somehow *Twelve O'Clock High*, *Pork Chop Hill*, *Captain Newman M.D.* and even *The Purple Heart* have taken on antiwar overtones, not because of any change in the films, but because the audience is unwilling to accept war's old *raison d'être* just because it's there. Today, the audience's attitude towards war is read into the old films, and the old films take on new meanings.

The makers of *MASH* have read the market well. *MASH* will undoubtedly be the big film this spring, not because it is such an antiwar statement, as many would have us believe, but because it caters to the antiwar sentiments of its audience. *MASH* is as crass a commercial vehicle as has ever been made. But, and herein lies one of Hollywood's greatest virtues, box-office returns are often the result of fine, meticulous craftsmanship coupled with clever artistry. *MASH* is one helluva commercial picture. It is also one helluva fine one.

MASH concerns the antics of Korean War army surgeons in a hospital unit three



Elliott Gould, Tom Skerritt and Donald Sutherland watching the wall of the women's shower, disappear in order to decide on a bet on whether Hot Lips is really a blonde. (She isn't.)

miles from the front line living in a Sgt. Bilko environment. The colonel (Roger Bowen) is too busy balling his girl to run the outfit, so his corporal, Radar O'Reilly does. Meanwhile, the rest of the camp functions as it wills, with surgeons Trapper John (Elliott Gould), Hawkeye (Donald Sutherland) and Duke (Tom Skerritt) being the centre of attraction, as they engage in one comic situation after another, variously involving Hot Lips (Sally Kellerman), the straight laced head nurse who is shown the error of her ways; Major Frank Burns (Robert Duvall), an incorrigible incorruptable sky pilot they send home in a straight jacket; Painless Poley (John Schuck), the best equipped dentist in Korea, who is convinced his Don Juanism is a coverup for latent homosexuality; Dago Red (Rene Auberjonois) the camp chaplain; and Lt. Dish (Jo Ann Pflug) who may very well qualify as the best equipped nurse in Korea.

The film is just a series of vignettes beginning with the arrival of Hawkeye and Duke at the 477th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital and ending with their return home. In the meantime, 116 minutes of hilarious film are unveiled before our eyes.

The traditional service comedy (*Don't Go Near the Water*; *Rally Round the Flag, Boys*; *No Time for Sergeants*) just won't sell to today's audience, because, you see, the Korean War wasn't that funny, and we can't indulge ourselves for two hours in the suspension of that sort of disbelief without feeling badly about it.

So the book by Richard Hooker, which the director called "pornography... just a bad book, a terrible book" was thrown out the window, and retaining only the situations, Ring Lardner Jr. built a story line about the characters by balancing the highly comic off-duty escapades with the graphic depiction of the insides of the operating theatres.

The operations are gruesomely realistic. I know of no one who wasn't uncomfortable watching them. Many had to literally turn away from the screen. The reduction of men to just so much meat cut open on the operating table was too much. The war-is-hell reminder is only too present in the surgery. Add to that lines like "If this guy knew the clowns who were operating on him, I think he'd faint", and "How could a despicable person like that get to a position of responsibility in the U.S. Army Medical Corps? — He was drafted." and you can understand why the U.S. Army and Air Force have banned *MASH* for reasons of morale.

By throwing in these sequences, the audience feels entitled to get a laugh out of the comic scenes, because, dammit, they've earned it.

The scenes appear incredibly realistic because they were. Each operation shown on film was actually an entire operation. The film on view is mere seconds of the hours of footage of the operating tables. The actors were given a sense of what they were doing by having an actor there on the table with a piece of simulated flesh (rubber and whatnot of varying textures

filled with pockets of liquid that would spurt like blood when cut) and so when the incisions were made, the actors felt they were cutting through flesh that throbbed and shook as the actor on the table breathed and moved beneath the scalpels. The impression is frighteningly real, more so than documentary footage of actual operations. People have walked out of the theatre because of it.

Said the director, "Well, that's good. If you don't have that, the picture has no value. I really tried to frighten the audience. I wanted them to laugh their heads off, and say "Oh Jesus, I hope they're not going to do another one of those," or say "How far are you going to go the next time?" I really tried to scare them, to make them feel while they were laughing and breaking up at the humor on the thing, that there's something terrible going on, and "Am I going to have to see that again," and that's the message. The audience eventually joins them, becomes like the surgeons themselves, accustomed, acclimatized to it."

MASH is a black comedy, because war is a black comedy. How else can a man keep his sanity and regard war? How else can announcements of showing of *When Willie Comes Marching Home*, *Halls of Montezuma* and *The Glory Brigade* at a *MASH* unit be taken? How can two units seriously contemplate a football game? This much is historically accurate.

In that light, the fiction in *MASH* is not so hard to believe.

Directed by Robert Altman, a distinguished TV director with no (*Cold Day in the Park*) reputation in films, *MASH* is a carefully photographed canvas of the bleak, drab, khaki and mud life in the army. The low key lighting and the soft focus blend well with the subject.

Excepting the contrived posing of the *Last Supper*, the composition and grouping in the film is accidental. Altman added 10 characters to the script, and told both them and the principals to improvise freely.

The acting is superb, the camera is casually appropriate, and the cutting and dubbing are clever.

In effect, *MASH* is Hollywood at its best — a good producer with a commercial sense influencing the director who has artistic control, aided by superb craftsmen and artists resulting in a very fine commercial and artistic movie that is painfully funny.

MASH is a hilarious, touching, zany comedy of the finest calibre, with only one really serious line in the film, which nevertheless makes its impact. Called away from giving a dead man absolution to assist in another man's operation, Dago Red is told "This man's still alive and that other man's dead, and that's a fact." That's what *MASH* is about. And that's a fact.

Fascinating film of Futz fares favorably

By LLOYD CHESLEY

Tom O'Horgan is definitely trying to do something to us. He started off in New York's theatre by assaulting the audience visually, aurally and physically. His weapons are voice, nudity, four-letter words and overall shock.

Now he has made *Futz*, his off-Broadway smash (is there such a thing as an on-Broadway play?) into a movie. His attention is to the same effect: shock. What he wants is audience involvement.

Sidelight: *Futz* is a man, a farmer more exactly, who happens to love his pig, a fact discovered when the local constabulary badgers a man who killed his girl into admitting that he did it having been driven mad by the sight of *Futz* having intercourse, or so we can assume, with the pig (Amanda by name).

What we watch is a play being put on in a farm field for an audience of "folk". At times the action on stage, through a jump cut or some other such editing manoeuvre, moves into the locale it is supposed to happen in. O'Horgan's first idea is to crack the bond between the stage and the audience, and this is one method.

Then he tricks you with the audience of farmers, for lo and behold they join the action. This is what O'Horgan has brought from the theatre to accomplish his task. In film he uses mostly sequences of fast cuts and mini-short shots, film's dynamic ability to whip around an audience, totally confusing them, totally involving them.

Jumps of this nature, that is from one locale to another or from the farmers status as audience to a status of players, are done through no intention. In other words

every time it happens there is no specific reason for its happening at just that moment. What this does is confuses the audience. Unable to understand the "why?" they become confused as to the "what?" and are never sure what is play and what is real. So, indeed O'Horgan does what he wanted in terms of involvement.

Another interesting thing in the film is the setting. Not only is it a farmyard, but it is a cloudy day after, sometimes during, a rain. It is a lush green area, nicely offsetting and assimilating the light blue clothes all the performers wear.

It is a cold day, a wet day. What it makes you feel is the way you felt the last time you were caught in a rainstorm. I mention this because it was so well communicated. It is an atmosphere you can feel. It is a new experience.

I can tell little in specific relation to the substance of the story, but I will accept this as intentional. The film is not intended to tell a tale, but rather to assault the emotions. Anyway, the story is lost amongst a melange of unconnected, often meaningless lines. Besides that, the cast makes extra-specially sure that any phrase that can be turned into a yell or a grunt is used that way. In this way there is more noise than substance.

This is not to say that the point is not made, but it is done not so much through content as through form. We are not supposed to understand the ideas, we are supposed to feel them as concepts. And so it is.

The cast, I should mention, is the Cafe La Mama

company, so we can assume that they know what they are doing in their delivery of lines. They are some of the most accomplished classical actors I have seen in a long time. Few have their technical control of voice and most especially of body and movement. They are a group perfectly suited to action theatre.

At times the pacing of the film lags. In other words, a sequence of one type runs too long; be it a monologue that becomes an irritating harangue or a set of fast cuts that run on until you no longer see the screen. But for the most part it is consistently exciting.

By the time your hour-and-a-half is up you feel firstly very wet, and secondly you feel the violence and injustice that they are talking about. You are exhausted in all ways. I might add that you forget their message soon in thinking about what they were doing. It is the form that remains foremost in your mind, and only a taste of the idea is with you.

I would figure that this is because the theatre experience that the film gives you is so novel that it is hard to forget. This is a good way to say something, but we have to get used to what we are going through before we are ready to settle down and listen.

Anyway, whatever your reason for watching (unless it's dirt, like four or five greasers who left after 20 minutes) you're bound to get some excitement out of this show. But let ye be forewarned: don't go expecting to settle back and sit. Even if you do, you'll be up off your ass before you know what hit you.