

Tonto eats on the job

Director Mazursky tricks film star with liver

By WARREN CLEMENTS
No director has ever claimed that coaxing an animal through a lead role in a movie is a snap.

Paul Mazursky, director of Bob, Ted, Carol and Alice, Blume in Love and more recently, Harry and Tonto, opened a 20th-Century Fox press

conference this week by recalling the "bonuses" of working with Tonto, a feline actor.

"Betty (the trainer) had to reward the cat after each scene," he related. "And after six shots, the cat would belch and get very drowsy. I'd say, come on, Betty, and she'd say, we have to wake the cat up."

To lure the cat onto beds and across beaches, Mazursky used a little clicker device to signal the right moment for the trainer to release the foot-high actor.

"For the bedroom scene in the motel where the cat has to leap on the bed, I would be hiding under the bed with the clicker and Art Carney (the picture's star) would be throwing catnip or liver on top of the bed to get cat to jump."

To ensure that nothing went wrong with the cat on location, the crew took along three trained 'Tontos'; only one was needed, and he played out his last scene in the film under a vet's anaesthetic to make sure he'd lie still.



Director Paul Mazursky talks about cats.

Carlo Squassero photo

"It wore off okay," remarked Mazursky. "He's at Hollywood and Vine now, picking up other cats."

The film was a morass of everyone's relatives: Lennie Bruce's mother played a bit part at the end, Mazursky's daughter popped up on a beach, and Mazursky himself, a part-time actor, played a cameo as a

hustler with an eye for Carney.

The film, shot in 38 days, has reportedly been doing well at the box office, although Mazursky doesn't think it will kick off a landslide of "old folks" film.

"Not unless the old people are dope smugglers and rapists, or get exorcised," he said.

Harry carries Tonto-and the film

A movie about an old man and an animal usually ends up with one of the leads upstaging the other.

And usually, in Greyfriar's Bobby and similar Disney epics, the animal wins paws down.

But in Harry and Tonto, a new film by Paul Mazursky, Tonto the cat is hardly noticeable. He's constantly around, heeling behind septuagenarian Harry Coombes (Art Carney) and clawing his way through buckets of fried chicken; but for all the warmth and excitement he generates, Tonto could just as well be a dishrag draped over Carney's arm.

The movie's real story lies in a quasi-King Lear set-up whereby Coombes, forced to live with his son in New York after a wrecking ball destroys his apartment, gets fed up with being mugged and heads across the U.S. to visit his daughter (Ellen Burstyn) in Chicago and his other son (Larry Hagman) in Los Angeles.

The trip is a Cook's tour of weird people like a cowboy who sells health food; an Indian (Chief Dan George, humorous in his role

although seemingly bemused by it) who lands in jail for casting spells; and a teen-aged runaway who convinces Coombes to drive miles out of his way to visit his childhood sweetheart, a protégé of Isadora Duncan.

Tonto hangs around like a spare tire, giving Coombes a target for his occasional sililoquies and acting as an all-purpose conversation piece. He's also adept at doing cute things like chewing Mars bars and racing into graveyards to take a wee and never returning.

The movie is entertaining, although nothing in the way of a crisis really occurs, and you get the feeling that attractive, friendly, intelligent Harry Coombes is something of a superman among 70-year-olds.

The ending, in which Harry Coombes the Old Man meets a Young Girl on the beach and literally pounds you into recognizing the film's theme — that youth is basically a state of mind and today is the first day of the rest of your life — is something of an anti-climax.

But Harry and Tonto has a cast of offbeat and amusing characters who collectively fashion Harry Coombes into an engaging enough guy to carry a whole series of movies on his back. The only danger is that, like all engaging movies, some network will surely turn it into a TV show.

And the irony is that Harry Coombes is the type who would probably try to avoid movies and TV shows anyway.

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