

MOVIES

'Twilight Zone' Movie Is an Uneven Effort

By Michael Gallagher
And John Sheehan

New York (NC) — "Twilight Zone: The Movie" (Warners), inspired by the popular television series of 20 years ago which made Rod Serling more or less a household word, is made up of a prologue and four episodes, representing the work of four directors. In the prologue, written and directed by John Landis, two men driving along in the dark (Dan Aykroyd and Albert Brooks) try various means of frightening each other until one comes up with something really special.

In the first episode, again written and directed by Landis, a middle-aged bigot (played by Vic Morrow, killed in an accident that occurred in the course of filming) finds himself transported first to Nazi-occupied

Paris, then to the American South, then to Vietnam, in each case finding himself in the role of a victim of bigotry. But there is little point to the whole effort.

In the second, directed by Steven Spielberg and written by George Clayton Johnson, Richard Matheson and Josh Rogan, sentimentality is the keynote, rather than chills or moralizing.

A charming old man (Scatman Crothers) puts new life — literally as well as figuratively — into the dispirited men and women who live in a seedy "retirement" home. Though this episode, like all but the first, is derived from an original "Twilight Zone" program, it's worth noting, I think, that it bears a striking resemblance to "The Silver Whistle," a Broadway hit of the early 50s in which

Jose Ferrer played the Crothers role.

In the third, directed by Joe Dante and written by Matheson, the picture, though remaining pedestrian, turns weird in earnest. A young woman (Kathleen Quinlan) finds herself drawn into a bizarre household controlled by the whims of a boy with extraordinary powers.

In the final episode, directed by Australian George Miller and written by Matheson, John Lithgow plays a distraught passenger on a storm-buffed plane whose already frayed nerves are shattered by the sight of a slimy green fellow sitting on the wing and happily demolishing an engine. When nobody believes him, he grows still more desperate.

The movie is decidedly a



Shocked passengers of an airplane threatened by an unknown horror crowd behind incredulous co-pilot John Dennis Johnston in a scene from the Warner Bros. film "Twilight Zone: The Movie." (NC Photo)

mixed bag, with only the last story rising above mediocrity. Thanks to Miller's sure-handed direction, and a funny yet touching performance by Lithgow, it manages to be both scary and

amusing, a rare achievement and one that leaves the rest of the movie far behind. Some frightening effects, which characterize all but the Spielberg episode, rule out younger children. The U.S.

Catholic Conference has classified it A-II, adolescents and adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

Movie Dogs for the Dog Days

By Michael Gallagher

New York (NC) — Here's our annual consumer report on the big summer movies, and I'm afraid it's not a cheery one. We worry about Hollywood not making any movies for children, but they don't seem to be making any movies for big people either.

"Blue Thunder" (O — R), the first summer blockbuster of the starting gate diminishes in the memory. Even a minute or two will cause it to fade significantly, a disability that afflicts most of the summer crop and which probably accounts for the big dropoff in the second and third week of their runs.

It's all about helicopters and special effects, and the plot is so negligible that you could inscribe it on the head of a pin with a blunt instrument. Then there's the gratuitous insertion of a nude scene, a cynical bit of exploitation that earned it its O, morally offensive, rating from the U.S. Catholic Conference.

There's not much point in saying anything about "The Return of the Jedi" (A-III — PG), since everyone, it seems, is bent upon finding out for himself. But here goes: not the in the same galaxy with the first picture but a little better, perhaps, than the pretentious and anti-climactic second entry. The storyline, coherence and characterization, what little there was of it before, lose out to some striking but repetitious special effects. An initial episode featuring some extremely weird looking creatures and one especially nasty monster makes it questionable fare for younger viewers.

"Superman III" (A-II — PG) is the biggest disappointment of the summer despite another fine performance by Christopher Reeve. The villains are neither evil enough nor funny enough, the plot elements are scrambled rather than blended and the special effects are so-so.

"Psycho II" (O — R) is an unstable mix of thriller and send-up of the original with neither aspect amounting to much. Though it's made

some 20 years after the original, as you may have gathered from the ads by now, and has enough modern-style blood and gore, the most objectionable scene in it is the shower scene from the original, in which the vastly overrated Alfred Hitchcock turned violent death into a spectator sport.

"War Games" (A-II — PG) will provide an evening of fairly good entertainment if you're not expecting too much. The best scenes are the earliest in which two missile controllers receive an apparently legitimate order to fire and the sequences devoted to a bright high school boy's efforts to break the code of a mystery computer which controls the country's nuclear defense options. Later, however, a semi-mad scientist comes on the scene to deliver the usual boring lecture on the follies of humanity, and then there is an anticlimactic sound and light show on he computer screens for a finale.

What's good about "Trading Places" (O — R) isn't new — it's an old-fashioned screwball comedy about the very poor and the very rich — and what's new about it — some quite gratuitous nudity — isn't good. Eddie Murphy is very funny, but the comedy palls about halfway through.

"Twilight Zone" (A-II — PG), a tribute to the old television series, is an anthology film with four separate episodes. Only the last — John Lithgow as a terrified airplane passenger who sees an oversize gremlin happily dismantling an engine in flight — rises above mediocrity. "The Man with Two Brains" (O — R) is another failed Steve Martin comedy which seems to have sunk without a trace, despite being somewhat funnier than the box office success "The Jerk." The morally offensive rating is for some nudity and sexually oriented humor.

"Survivors" (A-III — R), a satiric comedy by the talented Michael Ritchie, stars Walter Matthau and Robin Williams as two new recruits to the ranks of the unemployed who team up inadvertently to foil a holdup and then become involved in

a long-running confrontation with the bandit, a professional hit-man (Jerry Reed) who has also fallen upon hard times. For half its length, it's very funny, but Ritchie tries to bring in too much, and it runs out of gas. There is also a bit of the genitally oriented humor that Williams seems to be so fond of.

"Stroker Ace" (A-III — PG) and "Octopussy" (A-III — PG) recycle in slick fashion proven sellers at the box office: Burt Reynolds as a race car driver and Roger Moore as James Bond. Just as the "Star Wars" trilogy represents juvenile fantasy,

so these two pictures cash in on middle-aged fantasies, and as such are critic proof. Okay as mature viewing fare.

Which leaves us with "Yellowbeard" (A-III — PG) and "Porky's II," (O — R), two perfectly awful, supremely boring and tedious movies. Both are filled with vulgar attempts at humor, and the second also has graphic nudity and some extremely offensive language.

"Jaws III" (in 3-D!) I haven't seen yet, but I think I have a general idea of the basic plot line. How about you?

"Stroker Ace" (Universal)
Burt Reynolds is a race car driver once again, this time contracted to a fried chicken franchiser, a twist that gives him the chance to dress up in a chicken suit. The main storyline has to do with Reynolds' attempts to break his contract and to seduce Loni Anderson, playing "the world's oldest virgin." Directed by former stuntman Hal Needham with a minimum of subtlety, the movie is filled with racing sequences which include several crashes. The pace is fast, the humor the expected kind, and the general level of entertainment is higher than average. Occasionally there's some strong language, and there's one relatively mild bedroom scene. All in all, it's fairly good summer fun for mature viewers, and the U.S. Catholic Conference has classified it A-III — adults. The industry rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

"Porky's II: The Next Day" (Fox)
Directed again by Bob Clark, one of the crudest practitioners in the business, this sequel differs from the original in having an even more muddled and disjointed story line — the elaborate, boring hijinks of some crazed Florida high school boys. Oddly enough, there are also glints of a pathetic yearning for respectability, some banal sentiments, for example, in favor of Shakespeare and racial equality. But there is also enough nudity and scabrous dialogue to be thoroughly offensive. The U.S. Catholic Conference has classified it O, morally offensive, and the Motion Picture Association rating is R, restricted.

Fr. John Reedy

Looking for the Lord

The NCC Battles 60 Minutes

The National Council of Churches claims that the CBS program, 60 Minutes, was guilty of a hatchet job when it implied that the council supports and funds protest organizations which engage in brutal violence and are linked to communist ideologies.

To avoid the time and cost of litigation, the NCC proposed that the segment be submitted to third-party arbitration for an evaluation of its fairness.

CBS rejected the proposal, and the National Council of Churches claimed that this refusal constitutes a vindication of its claim that it was treated unfairly.

The final position of the council sounds like the solution (proposed by Senator Aiken, I believe) to our entanglement in Vietnam. When our military efforts seemed to be going nowhere, the senator suggested that we simply announce, "We've won!" and then pull out.

The NCC proclaims, "We're vindicated!" and hopes that most people will agree.

In fact, I think that both sides came out of this conflict with scars.

The basic weakness of 60 Minutes was clearly evident in its treatment of this issue. The program's blend of showmanship and journalism, which contributes much to its popularity, militates against a serious, balanced investigation of complex issues.

The format forces 60 Minutes to squeeze its treatment into a narrow time slot, even when adequate coverage demands more extensive treatment.

Much of the program's popularity comes from its reputation for being "hard-hitting," which frequently means a blurring of reporting and editorial judgment. I usually get the impression that the content was selected, with some gestures toward balance, to support the initial judgment which prompted the decision to cover the story.

This might make for lively viewing, but it certainly is not the best

approach to responsible journalism.

I saw the report on the National Council of Churches. I know something of the background on this issue; and I judged that the over-all effect of the report was one of distortion.

However, considering the differences between the 60 Minutes approach and a straight documentary, I judged that the problem lay more in the format and approach of the program than in a deliberate effort to do a hatchet job.

On the other hand, I also concluded that the NCC does have a serious problem in the distance which was developed between its sponsoring membership and the mentality of many of those who work professionally to shape its programs and services.

I know and admire some of these people. Those whom I have met impressed me as being deeply committed Christians who are trying to do all they can to relieve human suffering and injustice. They have an instinctive sympathy for those who are struggling to change social, political and economic conditions which are outrageously oppressive.

This sympathy can occasionally lead to recommendations which turn out to be unwise and embarrassing. But, for

Christians, excessive caution can also lead to a morally offensive inertia in the presence of our neighbor's suffering.

Somehow, though, the officials and staff of the National Council of Churches have to maintain their links to the awareness and convictions of the sponsoring membership. They are representing these churches, these congregations, these people who join together for common efforts.

My impression is that a huge gulf separates the experience, the sensitivity, the judgments of many NCC staff members from the awareness and practical judgments of local clergymen and the members of their congregations.

The council must do a better job of communicating to its constituency the experience and convictions of those who formulate the programs. The staff needs to be more sensitive to the level of understanding of the church members in formulating the various programs.

It is unhealthy — ultimately self-defeating — when a professional staff of any organization allows too much distance to develop between itself and its membership.

In the long run, that kind of a gap can be more damaging than the treatment you might get from the 60 Minutes crew.

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