

MOVIES

'Star Chamber' Loser in Credibility RaceBy Henry Herx
And John Sheehan

New York (NC) — "The Star Chamber" (20th Century-Fox) raises some serious questions about contemporary crime, the law and vigilante justice but in such a confused and muddled way that it leads nowhere.

The film, written by Roderick Taylor and Peter Hyams, who also directed, starts with the premise that our current criminal justice system protects the civil rights of lawbreakers but not those of their victims. Thus,

we see a thug who murders old ladies for their welfare checks set free on a legal technicality as is a pair of drifters accused of kidnapping and murdering children for porno films.

In throwing these cases out of court, the presiding judge (Michael Douglas) grows disillusioned about justice and the law. Confiding his sense of frustration to an older colleague (Hal Holbrook), Douglas is invited to join a secret group of justices who have formed their own kangaroo court which passes sentences of death on those who have escaped the courts.

The movie's title refers to England's court of summary justice, called the Star Chamber, started by King Henry VIII.

Accepting the logic of this extra-legal system, Douglas asks the death penalty for the two hoodlums that he was forced to release in the child-porno case. Before they are murdered, however, the real culprits confess and Douglas is transformed into a man of action, willing to sacrifice his life to save these two miscreants.

From this point on, all sense of credibility is thrown to the winds. What began as

a justification for vigilante justice in the tradition of the "Death Wish" and "Dirty Harry" films makes a switch to the opposite side of the issue, much like "The Oxbow Incident" or "The Wrong Man," except that the accused here turn out to be innocent of one charge but guilty of others.

The film easily plays on the fears of the public about the rise of violent crime and the seeming inadequacy of the courts to stem the tide. In its heavy-handed attempts to arouse the moral indignation of its audience, the film loads the deck with some vicious

criminals and then oversimplifies the legal process safeguarding the rights due anyone accused of a crime.

The only character who emerges with any shred of dignity from this mangled plot is the plodding police detective played by Yaphet Kotto. He is dedicated to his work, helps crack the child-porno case and then saves the conscience-stricken judge. Except for the victims, he is about the only sympathetic character in a film sure to arouse the ire of any one connected with the courts.

There are a number of irritating holes in the film's plot, such as a judge committing suicide for no other apparent reason than to open a place for Douglas on the kangaroo court. Given the nature of the crimes dealt with, there is thankfully little of it depicted on the screen. However, the amount of profanity in the dialogue is needlessly excessive.

The U.S. Catholic Conference has classified the film A-III, adults. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is R, restricted.

BOOKS

'God, Guts and Guns,' and Dorothy Day's 'Little' Way

"God, Guts and Guns: A Close Look at the Radical Right," by Phillip Finch. Seaview-Putnam (New York, 1983). 240 pp., \$16.95.

Reviewed by Joseph F. McKenna
NC News Service

So what is the Radical Right in America? It's not quite as easily defined as the average American might think.

"Joe McCarthy, if he were alive, probably wouldn't belong to the Radical Right," writes Phillip Finch. "Jerry Falwell doesn't, though some who admire him are close enough to bear mentioning... Sure, Nazis and Klansmen are automatic members. But so are some other people whose politics are just as extreme, if not nearly as notorious."

In fact, as Finch points out, the "Directory of the American Right" lists 1,596 organizations that identify with "right-wing positions." So, again, what distinguishes the most radical elements in that part of the socio-political spectrum?

The common distinction, Finch says, is to use "radical terms when discussing politics or social ills."

"We have no greater political taboo," he writes "and it's the one that the Radical Right cheerfully, doggedly, resolutely violates. That helps to explain the movement's perpetual status as a pariah in mainstream politics."

Finch, who has worked for the defunct Washington Daily News and the San Francisco Chronicle, carefully maps the waterfront on which the Radical Right docks its misshapened vessels of dogma. His early chapters are extremely interesting.

"God, Guts and Guns" should serve as a reminder to the average American that all his neighbors are not as open to differing viewpoints as he is. And it's likely that one of the viewpoints scorned is that of the average American himself.

(Joseph McKenna is a reporter for the Catholic Universe Bulletin in Cleveland.)

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"By Little and By Little: The Selected Writings of Dorothy Day," edited, with an introduction, by Robert Ellsberg. Knopf (New York, 1983). 371 pp., \$17.95 cloth, \$9.95 paper.

Reviewed by Nancy L. Roberts
NC News Service

"By Little and By Little" is an apt title for the first collection of Dorothy Day's writings. More than most, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker Movement recognized

the "holy sublimity of the everyday" in the persons of those least among us: the skid row bum lined up for daily soup, the destitute mother about to give birth, the alcoholic seeking surcease in drink.

By little and by little, Miss Day spent her life trying to restore their dignity. And in memorable portraits her writing illuminated the profound import of such souls.

Such personal journalism was Miss Day's forte. Ironical, conversational and unpretentious, her writing balanced the more esoteric, scholarly articles in *The Catholic Worker*, the penny paper furthering social justice and pacifism that she and Peter Maurin started 50 years ago.

"By Little and By Little" is culled not only from Miss Day's *Catholic Worker* columns but from her several books and published magazine pieces.

Included are such classics as her moving account of giving birth to her only child in 1926 (an event which filled her with such joy and thanksgiving that she became a Catholic) and her reaction to the bombing of Hiroshima: "We have killed 318,000 Japanese... They are vaporized, our Japanese brothers, scattered, men, women and babies, to the four winds, over the seven seas. Perhaps we will breathe their dust into our nostrils, feel them in the fog of New York in our faces, feel them in the rain on the hills of Easton."

Given the extraordinary range and quality of Miss Day's writings over 50 years, Robert Ellsberg faced no small task in selection. An able writer who edited *The Catholic Worker* in the late '70s, Ellsberg has been remarkably faithful to Miss Day's spirit, both in his representative choices and in his skillful but unobtrusive editing. In a perceptive introduction, he reflects on Miss Day's life and work, offering several new insights.

Anyone interested in the life of the luminous Catholic Worker leader will find this indispensable reading, as will the few who still do not know Dorothy Day -- for her writing is immensely powerful. On the basis of this collection, any connoisseur of literary journalism would place Dorothy Day between Charles Lamb and E.B. White, in the ranks of those few who can unite the everyday and the ultimate.

(Ms. Roberts, a member of the faculty of the school of journalism and mass communication of the University of Minnesota, wrote her doctoral dissertation on Dorothy Day.)

TV Shows of Note

Saturday, Aug. 20, 8-9:30 p.m. (PBS) — "All-Star Swing Reunion." Kicking off a week of fund-raising by public television stations is a nostalgic concert of such swing classics as "But Not For Me" and "God Bless the Child" performed by Red Norvo, Teddy Wilson, Louis Belson and other jazz greats.

Sunday, Aug. 21, 8-11 p.m. (NBC) — "The Towering Inferno" (1974) A 135-story office-residential tower goes up in smoke trapping hundreds of Hollywood extras and a score of past and present stars in a disaster movie weak in plot and characterization, but stunningly realistic in its special effects of death and destruction. A-III, adults; PG, parental guidance.

Monday, Aug. 22, 9-11 p.m. (NBC) — "The End" (1978). Except for the inspired buffoonery of Dom DeLuise, this is a painfully unfunny Burt Reynolds comedy about how not to commit suicide. It is seriously offensive in its disrespectful treatment of confession. There is also an explicit love scene as well as some highly insulting Polish jokes. When originally released in theaters, this film was protested against by representative of the Polish community for its ethnic slurs. O, objectionable; R, restricted.

Tuesday, Aug. 23, 10-11 p.m. (NBC) — "Marvelous Machines... Expendable People." NBC News correspondent Edwin Newman reports on the effect of today's increasingly sophisticated technology on workers and their need for retraining as previous skills are made obsolete by technological advances.

(The feature film, "The Wiz" (1978), originally scheduled for Aug. 20, 8-11 p.m. (CBS), will not be shown on that date but on Sept. 20, 8-10:30 p.m.)

New PBS Series May Help Bridge Culture Gap

By Henry Herx

New York (NC) — In a 1959 essay, British author-physicist C.P. Snow argued that Western civilization faced the danger of developing two divergent cultures — each with its own language — that of science and that of the humanities. His fear was that those trained in the increasingly complex fields of science and technology would have little time to devote to more traditional studies and that those schooled in the arts and humanities would have scant understanding of the technological future.

Although matters have not worked out quite that badly, there has been a rapid expansion of scientific knowledge and technological innovation almost beyond the comprehension of any but highly trained specialists. More than ever, the public needs to learn the fundamentals of science and their application in order to share the benefits of technology and to help avoid ecological, nuclear or other man-made disasters.

It is well for people to become as knowledgeable about the new technologies as about the traditional values which give sense and direction to scientific developments. The problem, however, is how to bridge that gap before it becomes too deep to close.

An innovative approach to the problem was made by public television several seasons ago with the BBC series, "Connections." Its purpose was to provide the general public with a sense of how technological change has been related to social changes over the centuries. The series was visually dynamic and fast moving, but it expected too much prior knowledge — ironically not of science but of history — and apparently went over the head of its audience.

Another attempt at much the same goal is being made by PBS through a new series, "Smithsonian World," now in production and scheduled for broadcast beginning next January.

Martin Carr, who conceived the project and is its executive producer, visited New York and talked with interested members of the press.

Carr described the series as "the first time television has ever tried to look at the arts, sciences and humanities all together as a whole rather than in little boxes of their own." He said he thought this was especially important for the young, who need to see how the different fields of knowledge relate to one another before their education is channeled into one or another specialty.

Reminded of "Connections," Carr said that it was an excellent attempt but failed perhaps because it was too

disjointed. "Our approach is a lot more focused by limiting each program to a single theme... It's more integrated and easier for viewers to follow."

Henry Herx Behind The TV Screen

As an example of what that means, Carr went through the segments of the program devoted to the relationship between time and light. It begins with a history of timepieces and various kinds of calendars, including "clocks of nature" such as tree rings, the fossilized shells of sea urchins dating back billions of years and the fascinating mystery of why bamboo around the world flowers, seeds and dies every 125 years.

From the birth of the modern calendar in the Vatican room where Pope Gregory was persuaded that the Julian calendar was inaccurate and had to be replaced, a transition is made to the use of light in American churches to create a spirit of prayer and meditation. Singling out a Spanish mission church in the Southwest, Carr described how its white adobe interior "diffused and cooled down the ferocious intensity of the sun, creating a sense of clarity and contemplation that is still felt by visitors today."

The program ends with the telescope that will be mounted in space to be clear of the polluted light surrounding the earth. Its view of space will be like "standing in New York City and being able to read a licence plate in Toronto." According to Carr, scientists will be able to see objects formed before the earth with their clues to the origin of time.

The central resource for these programs will be the collections, curators and scholars of the Smithsonian Institution.

Carr first proposed the series to PBS in 1978 but it took four years to secure funding. As a former network producer of news and cultural affairs programs, he said he welcomes the opportunity of working for public television because "the networks aren't going to attempt anything like this series."

The series is still in production and one hopes that the finished programs will project the infectious enthusiasm of its producer who summed up by saying: "I simply want to show people the incredible, marvelous place we live in and help them realize what a wonderful world it is."