

Looking toward Oscar

1983 Showed Willingness to Enter Political Arena

By Michael Gallagher
New York (NC) — Now that the December film rush is over, and it's possible for the harried critic to draw a breath, it's time for modestly profound reflections on 1983. Let me offer one: I think that the most noteworthy development in American popular entertainment in the past year was a willingness to get into politically sensitive areas.

I don't mean documentary films or public television or even network specials, all of which from time to time do dip into controversy. I mean, rather, mainline Hollywood theatrical films and made-for-television movies clearly meant to make the grade as popular entertainment.

Costa-Gavras's "Missing" of the previous year may have been the harbinger. This

story of an American father's vain search for his son secretly executed in the bloody coup against the democratically elected Chilean president, Salvador Allende, was extremely harsh in its criticism of what it alleged to be American involvement in Chilean affairs. So harsh in fact, that the State Department was moved to issue what was probably the first movie review ever composed by that venerable institution. (A pan, in case you missed it.)

Still, "Missing" could be written off as an exception, an isolated case of an America major studio inadvertently giving a politically inclined European director his head in a dangerous area, especially since there was little sign of political awareness in the other film releases of 1982. (Except of course for

"Gandhi," in which the politics was at a safe remove.)

But then this year came "Testament" and "Under Fire."

Neither is political in the same way that "Missing" is, nor is either, strictly speaking, controversial.

Yet "Testament's" stark, harrowing account of a heroic mother's attempts to cope with the terrible aftermath of nuclear war and "Under Fire's" wholehearted embrace of the Sandinista revolution against Somoza in Nicaragua have inescapable political implications.

In the first case, audiences who have empathized with a mother watching her children die one by one from the effects of radiation sickness — a mother, not incidentally, magnificently portrayed by Jane Alexander

— are likely to be that much more receptive to the idea of, say, a bilateral freeze on nuclear weapons and that much more dubious about the wisdom of deploying Pershing II and cruise missiles in Europe. No, "Testament" may not be political, may not be controversial in itself, but, as the saying goes, if one says "A," one must say "B."

As for "Under Fire," its depiction of two American correspondents so moved by the heroism of the rebels that they aid the Sandinistas by photographing a recently slain guerrilla leader as though he were still alive and sending back a false report to the media they work for may seem to present a problem more in the area of journalistic ethics than political controversy.

Its implications, however,

obviously go beyond that. For the basic thrust of "Under Fire" might easily lead the average moviegoer to start wondering how the good guys of 1979 could have so swiftly turned into the bad guys of 1983.

Nor was it a matter of theatrical films alone. Made-for-television movies, normally the most toothless form of the popular arts, suddenly developed a pronounced bite in 1983.

The example of "The Day After" is so evident that there is no need to go into it. It had such apparent impact that many of those in support of Reagan administration policy have been quite vociferous in their denunciations.

"The Day After," ABC's protests notwithstanding, is a political film which appeals primarily to the fear and self-interest of

Americans. Not so "Choices of the Heart," which NBC broadcast on the evening of Dec. 5.

"Choices of the Heart," the story of Jean Donovan, who with her three brave companions gave her life for the poor of El Salvador, makes its appeal rather to the conscience of Americans. And if "Testament" and "The Day After" depict what could happen, "Choices" depicts what in fact did happen.

Like "Testament," "Choices" is not political, but, also like "Testament," this very quality makes it extremely political. For if these murderers, whom a U.S.-supported government is unwilling or unable to bring to justice, killed someone like Jean Donovan, who would they not kill? And, again, if one says "A," one must say "B."

TELEVISION

'Made for TV' Is no Longer a Joke

By Michael Gallagher
And Henry Herx

New York (NC) — The designation "made for television" before "movie" was once, with excellent reason, wholly pejorative, but the times are changing. Made for television movies have gotten serious of late, and, in the process, have been attracting a good deal of attention because of the importance of their themes, which in most cases have been extremely sensitive, extremely controversial, or both at once.

"The Lost Honor of Kathryn Beck," deals with law enforcement authorities' coercion and abuse of the power of the press. It will be broadcast Tuesday, Jan. 24 at 9 p.m. on CBS.

Kathryn Beck (played by Marlo Thomas, who is also

executive producer), a young divorced woman who's working hard to make a catering business a success, yields to her cousin's protests that she should relax a little and goes to a party.

At the party this lonely, shy woman meets a mysterious but quite attractive man named Ben Cole (Kris Kristofferson). She invites him home, and they spend the night together.

Unknown to Kathryn, the local police have Ben under surveillance. He is a suspect in an armored car robbery committed by a radical faction. The police break into her apartment the next morning, and when they find that Ben has somehow slipped through their fingers, the angry detective in charge (George Dzundza) vents his

bitter frustration upon Kathryn.

She is humiliated in every way possible in the course of the interrogation that follows. The police confiscate as evidence whatever they want from her apartment. An unscrupulous police official even recruits an ambitious reporter from a scandal sheet (David Rasche) to heighten the pressure, leading to him material that could further damage Kathryn's reputation.

Nor do the reporter's scruples prevent him from sneaking into the hospital where her mother lies near death, getting her picture and running a fictitious interview.

Despite a sympathetic and well-connected lawyer, Kathryn is virtually helpless before this combined assault, and she is finally driven to strike back in the only way open to her in her desperate circumstances.

"Lost Honor" has some glittering credentials. It's based upon a German film adapted from a novel by Heinrich Boll, an esteemed German novelist and Catholic intellectual. The photography is by Academy Award-winner Gordon Willis. The director is Simon Langton, acclaimed for his production of "Smiley's People" on the BBC.

This American production is, moreover, in many ways an improvement over the German movie, which was far too heavy-handed. Much more effort has gone into developing the character of the heroine, and Marlo Thomas is extremely appealing. Dzundza and Rasche, as her two main adversaries, the

detective and the reporter, though they are disagreeable enough, remain recognizably human, not the caricatures of the German film.

The picture is well worth seeing, then, despite some plot twists that were handled more carefully in the original (notably the identity of Cole, a minor figure despite Kristofferson's top billing, and the manner of his escape).

"Lost Honor's" only real problem, besides probably being too grim for many viewers, is that it sets up the situation a little too starkly, an open and shut case of gross injustice without any shading. Thus, despite its virtues, it at times takes on the nature of a sermon.

Because of a bedroom scene that is rather graphic for television and the adult nature of the whole movie, it is definitely not suited to younger viewers, and parents would be well advised to let none but very mature teenagers see it.

"CBS Schoolbreak Special: Dead Wrong — The John Evans Story," Jan. 24, 4:30-5:30 p.m. (CBS)

On April 22, 1983, John Evans, 33, died in the electric chair at Holman Prison in Atmore, Ala. At the urging of the prison chaplain, Evans made a videotape a few days before he died. In it this young man who shot and killed a pawnbroker in the presence of the man's two little daughters, blamed himself alone for what happened. He came from a loving, middle-class family willing to give him all the affection and understanding he needed. But he turned his



John Laughlin as John Evans.

back upon them, and yielding to peer pressure, started down the path that led inevitably to its grim conclusion at Holman Prison.

An excellent dramatization of this cautionary tale is the first of CBS' new series "Schoolbreak Specials," which, broadcast in the late afternoon, will deal with adolescent conflicts.

The acting is first rate. John Laughlin is agonizingly believable as the self-destructive Evans, and John Lauter and Bibi Besch are excellent as his anguished parents. The direction and the writing, both by E. Arthur Kean, are extremely effective.

Though the short space of an hour is scarcely adequate to deal with the complexities of the unfortunate Evan's character and motivation, "Dead Wrong" does a highly commendable job and this is very good fare for teen-agers.

I must emphasize that it is for teen-agers, not younger children. Its conclusion is much too grim.

Finally, it's worth noting that the way in which the drama meticulously depicts almost everything involved in an execution in the electric chair makes it not only a cautionary tale, but also, whether intended or not, a powerful brief against capital punishment.

TV Programs of Note

Following are nationally broadcast programs of religious interest.

TELEVISION

Sunday, Jan. 22, (CBS) "For Our Times" — CBS News correspondent Douglas Edwards reports on the diplomatic corps of the Holy See and the potential significance of full diplomatic relations with the United States. (Please check local listings for exact time and station in your area.)

Sunday, Jan. 22, (SPN) "World Report" — NC News presents a weekly report on news and ethical and moral concerns. (Airs at 8:30 a.m. and 4 p.m. (EST) and is repeated Wednesday at 11 p.m. Please check local listings for cable channel in your area.)

RADIO

Sunday, Jan. 22, (NBC) "Guidelin'" — Country-western singer Jeannie C. Riley talks about her religion and career in the first of two interviews. (Please check local listings for exact time and station in your area.)

TV Film Fare

Saturday, Jan. 21, 9-11 p.m. (CBS) — "Making Love" (1981) — The reworking of the triangle motif which has the husband (Michael Ontkean) leave his wife (Kate Jackson) for another man (Harry Hamlin) is a predictable, uninspired film which, under Arthur Hiller's flat direction, manages to work up no emotional power whatsoever. Homosexuality — a word not mentioned in a script that uses the euphemism "gay" but once — is presented as nothing more than an acceptable variation on the normal process. This attempt to forestall moral implications is as obviously fabricated as the rest of the film. The U.S. Catholic Conference has classified it Q — morally offensive. The Motion Picture Association of America has rated it R — restricted.

Monday, Jan. 23, 9 p.m. (CBS) — "The Four Seasons" (1981) — Three couples maintain a friendship despite various ups and downs, most having to do with marital problems, in this entertaining but bland and superficial comedy written and directed by Alan Alda, who also stars in it. Much vulgarity and profanity and humor involving sex. A-III — adults; PG — parental guidance suggested.

AMERICAN CATHOLIC BROADCAST SCHEDULE

	Religious Experience: Fr. John Powell describes his personal religious experiences	1/19 10 AM	1/20 7 PM	The Bible: The Old Testament. A young victim of leukemia talks about how she and her family turned to God and the Bible as medicine for survival.	1/23 2 PM	1/24 8 PM	1/25 8 PM
American Cable of Rochester	#5						
Peoples Cable	#19						
American Cable of Webster	#5						
Channel 12 West	#12		8 PM			8 PM	