

MOVIES

The Ten Best Movies of a Humdrum Year

By Michael Gallagher

New York (NC) — Though there were a fair share of moderately entertaining films released in 1984, it was one of the bleakest in recent memory in terms of films of higher quality. It was so bleak, in fact, that I was hard put to come up with the hallowed-by-tradition Best 10 list.

But, traditionalist to the core, I came through nevertheless — though don't ask me to defend to the death some of my choices.

My first three selections, however, "The Killing Fields," "Diary for My Children" and "A Sunday in the Country" would honor any year.

"The Killing Fields" is a visually overwhelming and emotionally powerful film about the tragedy of Cambodia conveyed through the story of a friendship between two quite different men: an American correspondent, Sydney Schanberg of The New York Times, and his Cambodian assistant, Dith Pran. Pran disappears into the death camps of the victorious Khmer Rouge but, though millions of his countrymen perish, Pran survives.

This British-made, American-financed film is easily the outstanding general release picture of 1984 and it represents an extraordinary debut for its director, Roland Joffe.

The Hungarian film "Diary for My Children," which, coincidentally, also deals with the suffering wrought by a rigidly doctrinaire Communist regime, will not be seen by many Americans, but it should be — as much for our sake as for its.

Directed by the brilliant Marta Mesaros, it tells the story of a free-spirited teen-age girl, an orphan, growing up during the darkest days of Stalinist repression. She carries on a running conflict with an aunt whose whole life is given over to the party.

What is especially interesting about the film is Miss Mesaros's scathing mockery of the newsreels and movies of the period, which in the name of orthodoxy subjugated freedom of expression.

"A Sunday in the Country" is Bertrand Tavernier's film about an artist, honored by success and esteem in his old age, who nonetheless realizes his life and his art have been marked by compromise instead of the daring essential to any artist who would be great. This wise and poignant film will no doubt be seen by more people than Miss Mesaros's, but by not as many as it deserves.

My next two choices, "Cal" and "A Soldier's Story," are both of somewhat lesser stature, but they are still very good movies.

"A Soldier's Story" deals with the lacerating effects of racism on an Army post in the '40s. It's a taut and moving film marked by superb acting, especially Howard E. Rollins as an officer sent to investigate the murder of a black sergeant; Adolph Caesar as the victim, a twisted, bitter martinet; and Larry Riley as a happy-go-lucky Southern black unlucky enough to incur the sergeant's special ire.

"Cal" is an austere drama about an ill-fated romance in Northern Ireland between a hapless young IRA recruit and the widow of a murdered policeman. Helen Mirren is memorable as the widow.

A bit further down, but still a very good film, is a surprise: "Mrs. Soffel," an unheralded, very late 1984 release. The first American film of immensely talented Australian director Gillian Armstrong, it is the story of a turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh woman, the wife of a prison warden, who falls in love with a convicted murderer. She not only helps him and his brother to escape but also abandons her husband and children to join him on a desperate attempt to flee to Canada in the midst of winter. Diane Keaton and Mel Gibson turn in what are probably the best performances of their careers.

Finally, I have included "Places in the Heart," "Country," "The Natural," and "A Passage to India."

Of the two dramas about hard times down on the farm, "Places in the Heart" has too much of a golden glow about it and "Country" is a bit too contrived, but they have some fine acting and leave you with a good feeling.

"The Natural," in which Robert Redford plays a baseball star whose prowess had something mystical about it, suffers from a touch of blandness, but it is still entertaining.

David Lean's "A Passage to India," his first movie in 14 years, combines lavish spectacle, witty, incisive dialogue, and great acting (Judy Davis and Peggy Ashcroft). Unfortunately, it's lacking in dramatic punch and in some ways resembles an elegantly constructed shaggy dog story.

I think it's worth noting that of my top five choices, only "A Soldier's Story" is American from first to last. This I think is an indication of how far removed the American film establishment is from dealing in an uncompromising way with vital issues.

'Mrs. Soffel' Is Happy Exception among Films

By Michael Gallagher and Cynthia Engel

New York (NC) — Immensely talented Australian director Gillian Armstrong, whose feature film debut was the critical and popular hit "My Brilliant Career," has turned to a much more somber theme for her impressive American debut.

"Mrs. Soffel" (MGM-UA) is based upon an actual incident. Kate Soffel (Diane Keaton), a turn-of-the-century Pittsburgh woman married to a prison warden, falls in love with a convict named Ed Biddle (Mel Gibson).

Biddle, along with his younger brother Jack (Matthew Modine), has been sentenced to hang for a murder committed in the course of numerous robberies. The Biddles are popularly believed to be innocent of the murder, and they enjoy the status of folk heroes.

Kate's physical health is uncertain, and perhaps her mental health as well. Her home is under the same roof as the prison and so, as a Victorian housewife, she lives under a twofold repression — imprisoned figuratively as well as

actually. When she's feeling fit, she distributes Bibles among the prisoners and reads appropriate passages to them.

So it is that she comes under the influence of the handsome and magnetic Ed, who begins by arguing about God's ways to men and at length persuades her to slip him two hacksaws as a means, presumably, of lending God a hand to correct an imbalance of justice.

Finally, when Ed and Jack make their escape, she throws in her lot with theirs, abandoning her old life forever and joining the two fugitives on a hopeless attempt to flee to Canada across a winter landscape.

"Mrs. Soffel" is a powerful, extremely well-acted film. This is the best that Gibson has done yet, and in fact it may be the finest performance Diane Keaton herself has ever turned in.

The film strikes a fine balance between sympathy for the doomed principals and a clear-eyed depiction of the

devastation that Kate's betrayal of her husband and her rash flight brings down upon her family and herself.

Especially commendable is the way that Miss Armstrong resists the temptation to depict Kate's husband as any sort of villain. As portrayed by Edward Herrmann, he's a good husband and father, if a bit stuffy and a bit too concerned about his career.

One of the most powerful moments of the film, in fact, shows him at the end — his life in ruins — putting his hand to his head as he and his children prepare to move out of the home, that despite its setting knew many happy moments.

In a year that saw the release of few films that rose to the level of an adult sensibility, "Mrs. Soffel" is a happy exception.

Because adultery is a major element in the story, though clearly depicted as wrong, "Mrs. Soffel" is mature fare. The U.S. Catholic Conference has classified it A-IV — adults, with reservations. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned to give special guidance for attendance of children under 13. (M.G.)

BOOKS

Iran a Case Study on Clerical Politics

"The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution," by Shaul Bakhsh. Basic Books (New York, 1984). 276 pp., \$18.95.

Reviewed by
Father Robert Kress
NC News Service

Shaul Bakhsh was editor of a leading newspaper in Tehran, Iran, during the Islamic revolution and has since written and lectured widely on Iranian and Middle Eastern events and affairs throughout the world.

His book is clearly written, easy to read, generally as compelling of interest as a good murder mystery.

Which it is, in a way, since

K of C Sets Bowling Tournament

Feb. 1 will be the latest date entries will be accepted for the 60th annual Knights of Columbus Eastern Division Tenpin Bowling Tournament in Washington, D.C.

All members of the K of C are eligible to compete in the ABC-sanctioned handicap tournament. Each entrant will compete during one weekend between March 16 and May 12 for a total of \$40,000 in prize money.

Individual and team applications are available from Al Walukonis, tournament chairman, 7603 Villanova Rd., College Park, Md. 20740; phone (301) 474-7630.

the revolution inspired and orchestrated by the Ayatollah Khomeini has equalled and surpassed his predecessor the Shah's oppression and executions by far.

The opening describes the roots of the revolution, complex roots indeed. The next chapter describes the person and career of Khomeini in detail, noting that although he was and is clearly a leader in the tradition of Lenin's dictatorship, one must never forget the "degree to which postrevolutionary developments escaped central control and direction."

The author also describes the development of a theory and theology of a purely Islamic, theocratic state and the consequences of clerical intervention in Iran.

The same theme is continued but stressing economic policies.

Bakhsh indicates that Khomeini's adventure in "social engineering," like the Marxist brand the ayatollah

Young Adults

All young adults, aged 18 to over 35, either single or married, have been invited to a liturgy, 7:30 p.m., Monday, Jan. 21 at the Church of the Good Shepherd. The event is sponsored by the diocesan Commission on Young Adult Ministry, and is part of a series of spiritual, social and educational programs planned for the year. Further information is available from the commission's coordinator, Karen Rinefierd, 586-1919.

so detests, results not in social and distributive justice, in which the marginal and oppressed are led into a promised land of prosperity, but the creation of a new class, which henceforth consists of governmental bureaucrats instead of the customary landed gentry.

This is a very interesting book, not only informative about the recent past, but also signalling for the near future, especially for those who are enamored of:

- Socio-religious prophets denouncing the greed of the business community and proclaiming distributive justice.

Khomeini and his concerned clerical cohorts have indeed collectivized Iran, but have, unfortunately, produced, according to Bakhsh, merely "shifts but no major improvements," their major contribution being "further nationalization and government control."

- Clerical intervention in political, social, and economic affairs, since the cleric readily and customarily values piety and doctrinal-doctrinaire loyalty more than professional competence, so that those who end up in control "have faith but little skill," in the words of the author.

- So-called populist revolutions, for they are never of the people, but of middle-class intellectuals and are inherently expansionist — "revolutions without boundaries," as Bakhsh writes.

Father Kress is a professor of theology in the Program in Religious Studies of the University of Illinois.

STAGE

Kearney Alumni To Stage 'Mame'

The Bishop Kearney Alumni Theater Guild will stage the musical, "Mame," Feb. 1, 2, 8, 9, and 10 at the Bishop Kearney High School auditorium.

The show is based on the Patrick Dennis novel, "Auntie Mame," and features songs by Jerry Herman.

Advance tickets are available for \$5. At the door, tickets will be \$6 and, for senior citizens, \$4. All proceeds will go the high school.

Advance tickets for the Feb. 1 and 2 performances are obtained by calling Sue Howard, 265-0119; and for the Feb. 8, 9, and 10 performances from Patti Olesik, 225-6586.

The show is being directed by Tom G. Vazzana, and choreographed by Tom Giancuso. Music director is Dan Burke, and technical director is Sue Ganz. Dan Schwem is producer.

"The River" (Universal), the last of 1984's three hard-times-down-on-the-farm movies, is by far the least satisfactory of the bunch.

Whatever the defects of "Places in the Heart," which had too much of a golden glow about it, and "Country," which had too many loose ends, at least those films were quite clear about what they were about and they had likable, believable characters with whom we could identify.

But in this dull, earnest effort, the characters simply do not come alive — Tom and Mae Garvey, a hard-working young farmer (Mel Gibson) and his wife (Sissy Spacek), who battle adverse elements to keep their land from a nasty villain (Scott Glenn), who's also after Mae.

The whole middle of the picture, moreover, is devoted to Tom's working as a scab at a struck steel plant, a section that not only disrupts the unity of the drama but also muddles the moral outlook considerably.

What are we to make of a movie that portrays the villain (with the exception of some wholly absurd business at the end) as being not only more reasonable than the hero, but in some ways a nicer guy as well? (Old Tom is so ornery and proud that when floods threaten, he would rather work his wife and children into exhaustion than put in a few phone calls to his neighbors for help.)

Because of some violence and a restrained bedroom scene, "The River," directed by Mark Rydell and written by Robert Dillon and Julian Barry, has been classified A-II — adults and adolescents — by the U.S. Catholic Conference. The industry rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned to give special guidance for attendance of children under 13. (M.G.)

"Breakin' 2 Electric Boogaloo" (Tri-Star) is a sequel to the surprise hit of last year which won the race to crashing on the break dancing fad. It's more of the same, naturally.

This time it's the old chestnut about the kids who have to save the neighborhood community center by putting on a show. The big thing, however, is the dancing, with the plot being but the occasion for it. The performers are pleasantly exuberant, and the whole thing is innocuous. The U.S. Catholic Conference has classified it A-II — adults and adolescents. The industry rating is PG — parental guidance suggested. (C.E.)

The creators of "Johnny Dangerously" (Fox), a spoof of the old Cagney-Bogart gangster films of the '30s, seem to have exhausted most of their originality in giving their hero an adverb for a last name.

It starts out with some promise, but then swiftly hits rock bottom. Because of its vulgarity in language and incident, it has been classified A-III — adults — by the U.S. Catholic Conference. The industry rating is PG-13 — parents are strongly cautioned to give special guidance for attendance of children under 13. (C.E.)