

Critters, quirks and brutality highlight films

By Henry Herx

Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — "The Adventures of Milo and Otis" (Columbia) is a movie treat for youngsters and their parents. It's also a refreshing indication that the family film — an endangered species in the theatrical feature category — is alive and well.

With real animals and nary a human in sight, the movie chronicles a year in the life of a kitten named Milo and his friend, Otis, a pug-nosed pup. The two pals spend spring and summer finding their way around the farm on which they were born.

The problem child in his mother's litter of kittens, Milo always gets into trouble, leading the more responsible Otis to an early discovery of his calling as a watchdog. His vocation is put to the test when the crate Milo foolishly plays with on the river's edge becomes dislodged and sails downstream with Milo inside.

Racing along the riverbank, Otis never catches up with the crate until he finds it beached, abandoned and without Milo far downstream in spooky swampland. The missing Milo has gone off in search of food and shelter, and encounters a variety of wild animals, including deer, screech owls, a fox and a ferocious bear.

Otis also meets with wilderness adventures, including being rescued by a tortoise when he is trapped on the seashore by the incoming tide.

Eventually the two friends find each other and start for home. On the way, each finds a mate and shelter for the winter months. In the spring, they reunite and — with their new families — journey back to the farm.

This 1986 Japanese production has been adapted for U.S. audiences with a playful narration written by Mark Saltzman and zestfully read by actor Dudley Moore. The music track also has been Americanized with country fiddle tunes and a less-than-memorable theme song.

How well the adaptation works can be measured by the fact that, except for the credits, viewers would have no idea that they were watching a foreign movie. Nature, of course, is universal but it takes great film-making skill — and patience — to do more than simply record picturesque wilderness scenery and cute animals.

The credit for the movie's success belongs to its director, Masanori Hata, who also wrote the original story. He has captured the reality of animal life while at the same time investing it with human sensibilities.

The movie is filled with the wonder of nature and its seasons. It is a natural introduction to the cycle of life, including brief shots of the birth of a kitten and puppy. There is some mild tension in a few scenes with wild animals but — for the most part — this is a welcome, gentle film for young family members.

Unfortunately, teenagers may be unimpressed by a movie that features cute little critters as its main attraction, no matter how beautifully the movie is made. For sure, however, it's a children's movie with a view of the natural world that parents and most other adults can thoroughly enjoy.

The U.S. Catholic Conference classification is A-I — general patronage, and the USCC recommends the movie. The Motion Picture Association of America rating is G — general audiences.

'sex, lies and videotape'

The main prize at this year's Cannes Film Festival went to "sex, lies and videotape," a low-budget project from Miramax.

What makes this effort of interest is that it focuses on the shifting relationships among four characters rather than on a special-effects spectacle. In this sense, it falls more into the tradition of European cinema than into that of Hollywood movies.

Written and directed by Steven Soderbergh, the movie doesn't have quite the



Milo, the kitten, and Otis, the puppy, find themselves confronting one challenge after another in "The Adventures of Milo and Otis," in which the cast consists entirely of animals.

subtle irony of such Eric Rohmer works as the "Six Moral Tales," but it follows much the same pattern of mixing droll dialogue and perplexing situations. Soderbergh's primary character is Ann (Andie MacDowell), a mildly obsessive woman who knows that something is wrong with her marriage, thinks she's to blame, but suspects something is going on with her husband.

The husband, John (Peter Gallagher), is a high-priced lawyer, smugly self-satisfied with his lot in life. He is, in fact, having an affair — with his wife's sister, Cynthia (Laura San Giacomo).

A free but restless spirit who serves drinks in a working-class bar, Cynthia clearly enjoys her power over John, but relishes it more as an act of spite against her unliberated sister. This sibling rivalry is one of the movie's most insightful and amusing aspects.

Adding a fourth angle to the existing triangle is Graham (James Spader), a school-days chum of John who, having invited Graham to stay a few days, quickly realizes that they no longer have anything in common.

Ann, however, becomes intrigued by Graham's strange attitudes and lifestyle — he lives out of the trunk of his rusting car because he doesn't want to be encumbered by carrying around keys to an apartment.

Though Graham's source of income is never quite explained, it is less important than the fact that he is impotent and obsessed with his videotape collection of videotapes of women recounting their sexual experiences.

Ann is repelled by this aberration, but Cynthia finds it sexually intriguing. How all this turns out for the foursome is more or less morally satisfying as self-deceptions are unmasked and positive patterns of conduct initiated.

In the age of Dr. Ruth and assorted other talk-show pundits, hearing people unreservedly discuss their sex lives has become almost boringly commonplace. The characters in this movie talk about sex a good deal but sex is used here mainly to illustrate how people lie to each other and to themselves.

The film is also directly critical of the unhealthy nature of voyeurism, not only that of Graham but also that of the audience. The result helps distance the viewer from the unsavory events portrayed on the screen. Though there is no nudity, there are several suggestive sex scenes.

This is a quirky picture of contemporary moral values, one that raises questions and probes motivations about sexual behavior — something some adults will not find worth considering. Though the movie is not a moral textbook, many will find it sensitive to the moral principles of love and

honesty, which should govern human relationships.

Because of the mature nature of its theme, the use of graphic sexual language and some suggestive sexual scenes, the USCC classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

'Casualties of War'

An atrocity committed by American soldiers during the Vietnam War is re-created in "Casualties of War" (Columbia). The dramatization proves to be as morally repugnant as the actual event upon which the movie is based.

The narrative follows a five-man patrol sent deep into bush country on a reconnaissance mission. The sergeant in command decides the patrol needs some "portable R & R" and kidnaps a Vietnam woman (Thuy Thu Le) for the soldiers to gang rape when they reach their destination.

Eriksson (Michael J. Fox), newly arrived from the States and not as hardened as the other members of the detail, wants to help the woman but is unable to stop them from brutalizing and ultimately murdering her.

The ringleader in all this is Sgt. Meserve (Sean Penn), a man who has seen too much action in a dirty guerrilla war against an enemy indistinguishable from the rest of the Viet population. Eriksson is no match for this embittered veteran and, in fact, comes to realize that Meserve would just as easily kill him as the woman.

When the patrol returns, Eriksson tries to report the woman's murder, but the unit's officers advise him to forget about it. A chance meeting with a chaplain does, however, lead to the court martial of the four men responsible.

Adapted by David Rabe from the book by Daniel Lang, "Casualties of War" is a dark vision of America's involvement in Vietnam. The movie reopens old wounds that still fester deep in the American subconscious about the morality of the war and the means used in fighting it.

The moral conflict in the movie revolves around a young soldier who finds his Christian value system has little meaning in conditions that have hardened the consciences of his comrades. That he perseveres and does what he can is the story's only hopeful aspect.

To involve the viewer in that moral conflict, director Brian DePalma has chosen to show the horror of the situation in graphic detail.

Once again, as in "Scarface," DePalma demonstrates his predilection for excess. The language is a constant stream of obscenities; the violence and threat of violence is extreme; and the abuse of the woman is

graphically shown.

Penn's intense performance as the callous, conscience-deadened sergeant is of the man-you-love-to-hate variety, a role that becomes the misplaced heart of the film. Unfortunately, Fox is miscast as the conscience-stricken soldier and is unable to bear the weight of the central character's dilemma.

Because of the movie's graphic depiction of a wartime atrocity, much violence and foul language, the USCC classification is A-IV — adults, with reservations. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

Herx is director of the U.S. Catholic Conference Office for Film and Broadcasting.

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