



Elizabeth Butler

Museum

(Continued from Page 4B)

arrowheads —"
"Does he?"
"Oh hell yes. He does them all by hand and everything. He does them the Indian way. If you're buying them from him he'll tell you he made them but by the time they get around nobody knows they were done by a white man."
Robert returns, carrying three boards of arrowheads and several silver pieces. He says he is asking \$1,000 for the lot. Butler decides that the arrowheads are local, and expresses similar disinterest in the silver. Robert leaves.
"Poor," says Butler, "poor qual-

ity. That one necklace was all done by machine."
The incident emphasized the increasing difficulty in finding good Indian art. Both Butler and Ford say they will often go to shows and find only a handful worth considering. Much of the work is commercial; other, damaged or poor craftsmanship.
Some of it is simply faked. With Indian art ranging in value from hundreds to thousands of dollars, forgeries are a lucrative proposition.
"There are people with no conscience who don't mind that they

are perpetuating a crime," Butler says. "They're looking at it from a sheer standpoint of greed."
Greed. Combine it with dying skills and a lack of understanding by both the general public and Native Americans, and the Indian art world begins to look frantic and confused.
But one thing seems oblivious to it all — the art itself. Kwahu Kachina stands posed in his case

with something no one else has — the power of a mythology, the chant of a craftsman. The world lives a little longer because of his existence.
Just incredible, the woman says.
And again the Eagle Being leaps for the sky.
The Butler Museum of Indian Art, 1155 First Street, is open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Saturdays. Admission is \$1.50 for adults, 25 cents for children.
Story by Eric Maloney
Photos by Eric Boekelheide

The Choirboys

Comedy not funny as Aldrich's films negate hero myths

Robert Aldrich may well be the most underrated American director working in the seventies. On the surface, this is puzzling, since Aldrich's work has some obvious merits, not the least of which are a vivid, aggressive visual style and an exceptional consistency and coherence of theme and characterization.

Further, Aldrich has, for at least a decade apparently, retained almost complete control over his career, choosing his projects and making his films without outside interference. Even when, in the late sixties and early seventies, a series of financial disasters destroyed his production company, he stubbornly struggled to retain his independence, finally making two moneymakers, *The Longest Yard* (1974) and *Hustle* (1975), to go with his earlier successes, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962), and *The Dirty Dozen* (1967).

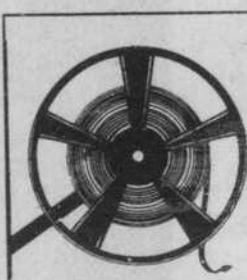
Despite this evidence of integrity and commitment to personal film-making, Aldrich is appreciated as an artist only by a handful of cult admirers. More than once, a new Aldrich film has been reviewed superficially as if it were a piece of commercial hackwork.

Ironically, it is probably the force and integrity with which Aldrich renders his vision on the screen that, more than anything else, encourages his neglect; he is not a likeable director, and his world is an extraordinarily unpleasant place.

Violence and treachery are not uncommon in action films, but most directors undercoat the bleakness with sentimentality, often in the form of a romanticized central character. Aldrich, however, sees a world where heroism

can no longer exist (one of his films is revealingly titled *Too Late the Hero*). His characters often have few choices; a man betrays his friends in *The Choirboys*, and

most malevolent indifference. The more sophisticated myths of the seventies get the same Aldrich treatment. Perhaps the director's most telling refusal to



By DAVID COURSEN

a U.S. President conceals a major scandal and connives in his own assassination in *"Twilight's Last Gleaming"*. In *Hustle*, a man is ludicrous and pathetic when he tries to play the hero and avenge his daughter's death; the closest thing to heroism in the film is a cop's effort to conceal the sordid murder the would-be hero finally commits.

If Aldrich often rejects and invariably undercuts traditional types of heroism, he is no more receptive to the heroes of the seventies. American football-worship is the subject of apparently good-natured satire in *The Longest Yard*. In *Hustle*, however, when a man is called away from a football game to identify his daughter's body, the incessant sound of that game, coming from a series of nearby radios seems to mock the tragedy the man must face; in the process, the sound unforgettably objectifies the world's utter, al-

romanticize is in his 1972 cavalry western *Ulzana's Raid*. In typical seventies fashion, the film features a callow officer who, acting as a kind of liberal mouthpiece, suggests that Indians have been systematically brutalized and oppressed; hence their violence must be understood. But Aldrich is not debunking one mythic hero, the noble cavalryman, merely to create a more modern equivalent, the Noble (peace-loving) Savage. Instead, *Ulzana's Raid*, despite its modern perspective, is unsparing in its depiction of both the brutality and the martial skills of its marauding Indians.

In *Ulzana*, as elsewhere, Aldrich describes men caught within larger processes that are beyond their control. The actions of each individual may be important to him and those around him but are futile as attempts to control the situation. The integrity of Burt Reynolds' cop in *Hustle*, or the

patriotism of Burt Lancaster's missile base hijacker or the decency of Charles Durning's president in *Twilight's Last Gleaming* (1977's best film), are meaninglessly overwhelmed by the pervasive immorality of their societal and political contexts.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Aldrich has created some of the most devastating final images in the American cinema. *Kiss Me, Deadly* (1955) concludes with the sound of an endless scream as an A-bomb explodes. In some ways, the final shot of *Twilight's Last Gleaming* is even more agonizing as the camera recedes from a slain American President surrounded by symbols of the militarism that has demanded his life.

Thus it is not surprising either that Aldrich's newest film, *The Choirboys*, though billed as a "comedy," is not very funny. Aldrich has a malicious sense of irony, but his feel for the nuances of comedy is erratic. As a result, the film's weakest moments are often those when it is most conspicuously laboring to be funny; a parking lot traffic jam, obviously and ineptly plagiarized from *Nashville*, is one glaring example.

But if *The Choirboys* (the name refers to a group of Los Angeles cops who hold choir practices — drunken debauches — in a city park) fails as comedy, it is more than redeemed by its characteristic Aldrich strengths. It is most effective in the force with which it

suggests the treachery of the choirboys' working environment. In fact, one reason the film is not particularly funny is that Aldrich is never unmindful of the consequences of the ways policemen exercise their power. The choirboys may be no worse than ordinary men, but in their job that makes them dangerous, to themselves and to others.

As a result, the film's humor often has perverse overtones. When a psychotic patrolman talks tough to his partner, his brutal descriptions may be grotesquely humorous. But when he talks tough to a potential suicide, thereby persuading her to jump, the humor pales. Later, with a swaggering machismo that is almost terrifying, the same man turns a minor domestic quarrel into a near riot, in which he is finally beaten with a violence that is disturbingly cathartic; for this act, he receives a special citation.

In short, the film is typical Aldrich. It is other, less brutal choirboys who fail each other, and who become involved in sadomasochism, suicide, and murder. Finally, the oldest and wisest of the group, "Spermwhale" Whalen (Charles Durning, in a brilliant performance), six months from retirement, saves himself and his pension by betraying his fellow officers. Despite an ambiguous final reversal, it is clear here, as in all of Aldrich, that the well-intentioned, no less than the brutal, can be destroyed. Heroes don't survive. Too late the hero.

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