

Director's talent wasted with basic bad junk

Harold Robbins novels are the McDonald's hamburgers of best-sellerdom, complete with the certificate of quality: over 140 million served. With that kind of success, Robbins can afford to sneer at sissy critics who reject his writing as crass, superficial, unspeakably crude exploitation (his stories are almost invariably thinly disguised libels of "real people," from Lana Turner to Howard Hughes). Robbins does have an instinctive flair for telling a story dramatically, but his greatest asset is his willingness to cater to his readers' fantasies — of easy access to money, power, and the powerful; and, of course, of the greatest power of all, that which flows from the loins of macho studs.

For some inexplicable reason, Robbins has recently decided it is important to retain creative control over film adaptations of his novels. As a result, though he did not officially write, direct, or produce his newest film, *The Betsy*, (about a car, not Davy Crockett's rifle), it was done for the Harold Robbins production company, and no one could mistake it for the work of anyone else.

The Betsy is full of vintage Robbins fantasies of individuals of infinite power. One character tells off the Secretary of Commerce, another describes how easily Mafia muscle-men "can be dealt with." Throughout the film, the two real heroes bestow carnal delights on almost every woman in sight.

Naturally, only the most grotesquely soap operatic plot convolutions are worthy of such extraordinary people. A small child wakes up in the night, goes outside, and

watches his father blow his brains out. After seeing this, Junior runs upstairs, opens the door to Grandpa's bedroom, and who should he find there in bed with the old man but Mommy. Pa, you see, being the offspring of a dominant

peating their most famous shticks, his from *The Godfather*, hers from *All the President's Men*, acquit themselves honorably.

Olivier's performance is more problematic. A veteran performer long since certified, by audiences

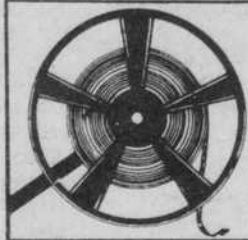
The Marathon Man as straight comedy, and, in the process, exposed the ludicrousness of the whole project.) Given the nature of his role, the broadness of his performance in *The Betsy* is not inappropriate.

The film's quota of incompetence is easily filled by two unknowns, Kathleen Bellon, who speaks her lines like a slightly near-sighted person trying to read without glasses, and Tommy Lee Jones, whose only method of showing emotion is to speak more rapidly.

The only person who really does much to redeem all this jumble, however, is director Daniel Petrie, who has shown, with two of his previous projects (*Buster and Billie* and *Lifeguard*), sensitivity and a subtle, if erratic, instinct for humanizing stock characters. His

direction here is tasteful and understated, with few of the leering close-ups that would serve as visual translations of Robbins' crudely voyeuristic writing. Even the lavish decor, the very heart of Robbins' fantasyland, is, on at least one occasion (the suicide-incest sequence) used expressively.

Petrie's contribution is not great, but, in the context of *The Betsy* even traces of directorial taste or intelligence are welcome. Hopefully, this film's commercial success will give Petrie the freedom to refuse similar assignments in the future. Otherwise, his modest talents will be wasted, as they are here, in futile efforts to transform bad junk into mediocre junk. Petrie deserves better, though Robbins certainly deserves worse.



By DAVID COURSEN

ing father, became a weakling — that is to say, in Robbins, a homosexual — and Mommy, being lonely, naturally gravitated to the real man on the scene, Grandpa.

To film this kind of nonsense, Robbins has gone for real class: a six million dollar budget and a cast full of impressive names: Laurence Olivier, Robert Duvall, Jane Alexander. In addition, presumably also in the name of class, a bit of Robbins-style psychology, a minor character's endless struggle with constipation, was dropped from the story. Whether Robbins felt that this detail might offend people, or would simply be mistaken for a homage to Mel Brooks, its, uh, elimination is a blessing.

This strategy has not exactly produced a work of dignity, but it has had some odd results, particularly in the film's diverse acting styles, which range from restrained competence to hammy overacting, to overt incompetence. The professionals in the cast, Duvall and Alexander, re-

and critics alike, as a "serious actor," Olivier here continues his recent willingness to sell his services to dubious films and then, on occasion, ham it up with a shamelessness that approaches camp. (I'm not complaining; I appreciated the sly way he played

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