

# On screen

## New Movie Crop: Wilted, Stunted & Rotten

**PRETTY BABY**, with Brooke Shields, Keith Carradine, Susan Sarandon; written by Louis Malle and Polly Platt; directed by Malle.

It's easy to be outraged by *Pretty Baby*. The subject matter alone — child prostitution — is enough to set most people's minds on edge. Considering that today the kiddie porn industry is one of the fastest growing businesses in America, it's difficult to accept a movie that couches child prostitution in softly luscious tones, completely ignoring any suggestion that the world's oldest profession, as practiced by society's youngest citizens, is a damaging, insidious travesty of morality.

Louis Malle's vision of his pretty baby, a 12-year-old whore-in-waiting named Violet, is cautious, careful and calculated. His camera work (executed by the brilliant Swedish cinematographer Sven Nykvist) is almost achingly beautiful, and the insular world he creates for his tender young heroine is so delicate one would almost think she was an orchid growing up in an expensive, loving greenhouse. Any sense of disease, failure, frustration or exploitation that women forced into prostitution have felt since time began is completely ignored. Instead Malle sets up a bogus, seductive world that refuses to admit the concept of right and wrong.

Malle and his novice screenwriter Polly Platt developed *Pretty Baby* after reading several accounts of Storyville, the notorious redlight district of New Orleans that was finally shut down by the Navy in 1917. They read about a 12-year-old whore called Trick Baby who worked in tandem with her mother, servicing the well-heeled citizens of the city. Malle and Platt also saw the exquisite photographs of a man named E. Bellocq, a hydrocephalic who lived among the women and photographed them with the loving tenderness and clear-eyed classicism of a saint.

In the film (not in actuality) Bellocq falls in love with *Pretty Baby* and eventually marries her. Malle would like us to believe that Bellocq is the victim and Violet the aggressor, but it's a literary conceit that contradicts what we know about human nature; children, however tough-minded and willful, are still at the mercy of adults. *Pretty Baby* is the ultimate male-oriented fantasy where a child, ripe and ready for sex, welcomes the activity without regard to her own needs and emotions.

On the surface the movie is graceful, lyrical and lush. At its heart it's corrupt and sinister, not because of its subject matter but because Malle refuses to grapple with the issue. He's created a rose-colored world as contrived as second-rate Maxfield Parrish.

**Jacoba Atlas**

**F.I.S.T.**, starring Sylvester Stallone, Rod Steiger and Peter Boyle; written by Joe Eszterhas and Sylvester Stallone; produced and directed by Norman Jewison.

Recent months were filled with Hollywood stories of how Stallone rewrote Eszterhas'



Stallone: a fat stick with a speech impediment

original script so that Stallone's character would be a nicer guy. He also fought for a happy ending, but at least he lost *that* battle. *F.I.S.T.* offers ample evidence that Stallone is a one-character actor, but he was not cast as a loveable loser this time. He is supposed to be magnetic, pragmatic and very successful, but he fails to demonstrate half the charisma his character allegedly has; he shouts often, clenches his fists frequently and projects all the power and sex appeal of a fat stick with a speech impediment. Even the brief courtship scenes with Melinda Dillon are pallid *Rocky* retreats.

Stallone plays Johnny Kovac, a common laborer in Cleveland whose natural instinct for leading men helps elevate him to the presidency of the Federation of Interstate Truckers. Kovac is corrupted along the way — not just because he's weak or ambitious or given to demagoguery (none of which are explored), but because he brings the Mafia into the union to help end a labor dispute. Kovac is portrayed as a prostitute with a heart of gold, bedding down with the Mafia but still keeping his integrity. Sure, sure.

Eszterhas, a talented reporter and former senior editor at *Rolling Stone*, deserves another chance. I'm not so sure about Stallone, and Jewison, who has given us such turkeys as *Jesus Christ, Superstar* and

*Rollerball*, should go back to Canada and leave us alone.

**Judith Sims**

**THE NEW KLAN**, a documentary by Eleanor Bingham and Leslie Shatz.

The filmmakers' attitude is no secret: *The New Klan* is subtitled *Heritage of Hate*, but it would be difficult to compile a completely sympathetic portrait of these hateful people. While Imperial Wizard David Duke keeps insisting the Klan does not advocate violence, a hooded Klansman talks about his participation, with two other Klansmen, in the murder of a white woman who was riding in a car with a black man; another tells how a former scuffling opponent now "has a gravestone." It's chilling stuff, alleviated by some unintentional humor: looking over a racist comic book the Klan distributes to school children (!), one man notes that the problem in their area is Mexicans, not blacks, but "It's hard to show brown in black and white."

Two former Imperial Wizards are interviewed, a Klan initiation ceremony is filmed (but the oath is not recorded) and dozens of Klansmen and women tell us why they believe the white race is supreme. None are very convincing; with their obesity and blank stares, they don't seem supreme any-

thing. While the film is unsettling, it is not ultimately frightening; the Klan has, after all, nowhere near the power it had in the Twenties when nine million adult males were enrolled.

Distributed primarily to colleges and universities, *The New Klan* is remarkably photographed and edited, marred only by a rather stentorian narrator. I saw *The New Klan* with an audience composed of a few vociferous Klan sympathizers and several equally vociferous Klan haters; both factions found something to cheer.

**J.S.**

**THE END**, starring Burt Reynolds, Dom DeLuise and Sally Field; written by Jerry Belson; directed by Reynolds.

Silly Burt, tampering with his mad-dash, cocked-eyebrow, shoot-'em-up action success formula. He changed his pace, all right, but to a crawl: Burt plays a man with a fatal disease and one month to live, so he tries to kill himself — often, and not very amusingly.

Sally Field, as Burt's girlfriend, is given all of ten minutes in which she isn't very good, but then she has nothing to do except jump up and down and cry. Same goes for Joanne Woodward as Burt's ex-wife, except that in *her* ten minutes she's angry. DeLuise, as a Polish lunatic, and Robby Benson, as a young priest, are both good for a laugh, and that's about all we take home from this movie. Two laughs.

Not even Reynolds' undeniable charm saves this dreary tale. What's most puzzling about all this is why Reynolds ever wanted to make this picture in the first place.

**J.S.**

**METAMORPHOSES**, screen treatment, produced and directed by Takashi.

Five animated tales from Ovid's ancient masterpiece backed with excruciatingly dull rock music (occasionally leavened by Joan Baez, the Pointer Sisters and the Rolling Stones, though not nearly often enough), *Metamorphoses* is unimaginative, cutesy and dreadful. At one point, when an arrogant young hunter is transformed into a deer (and gets hunted himself, of course) he looks

Reynolds & Field wasting their time and talent

