

# On Screen

**DAYS OF HEAVEN** starring Richard Gere, Brooke Adams, Sam Shepard, Linda Manz; written and directed by Terrence Malick.

This is Terrence Malick's second feature film; the first, *Badlands*, was critically acclaimed and financially disappointing, but the box office response did not, apparently, make Malick nervous. He spent two years on *Days of Heaven*, editing and re-editing, refusing to compromise his vision, and the result really is a vision. Cinematographers Nestor Almendros and Haskell Wexler create breathtaking vistas, endless wheatfields and distant purple mountains (of Canada, substituting for the Panhandle), 360 degrees of emptiness, except for one ornate farmhouse, a tall Victorian lighthouse in an ocean of wheat. Black-clothed figures moving in fields reminded me of Iowa long ago and the Amish people who lived there, dark and silent and remote. There is about this film almost an epic religious quality, uplifting, vengeful and redeeming.

Three people—lovers Gere and Adams (who pretend to be brother and sister) and a young girl, Manz, flee Chicago when Gere kills a man in the steel mill where he works; they travel to the panhandle and work the wheat harvest, where farmer Shepard, attracted to Adams, asks her to stay on. She does—with Gere and Manz. At Gere's urging, she marries Shepard (whom everyone believes is a dying man), and for awhile they all live in near-blissful harmony. But Gere and Adams are not through with each other; the farmer gets healthier every day, and passions gone astray come home to roost.

Malick keeps us at a distance from these people, which disturbs some viewers; we never see inside them, we only see what they do. They are not fools, and they behave with honor at times—but not enough. Pride and jealousy intervene. The film moves slowly, inexorably, and the threat of violence is constant in the everyday chores and pleasures. Even the sound is ominous, from the steel blast furnace, the train, the huge threshing machines, a prairie fire, all throb like frightened blood in our ears.

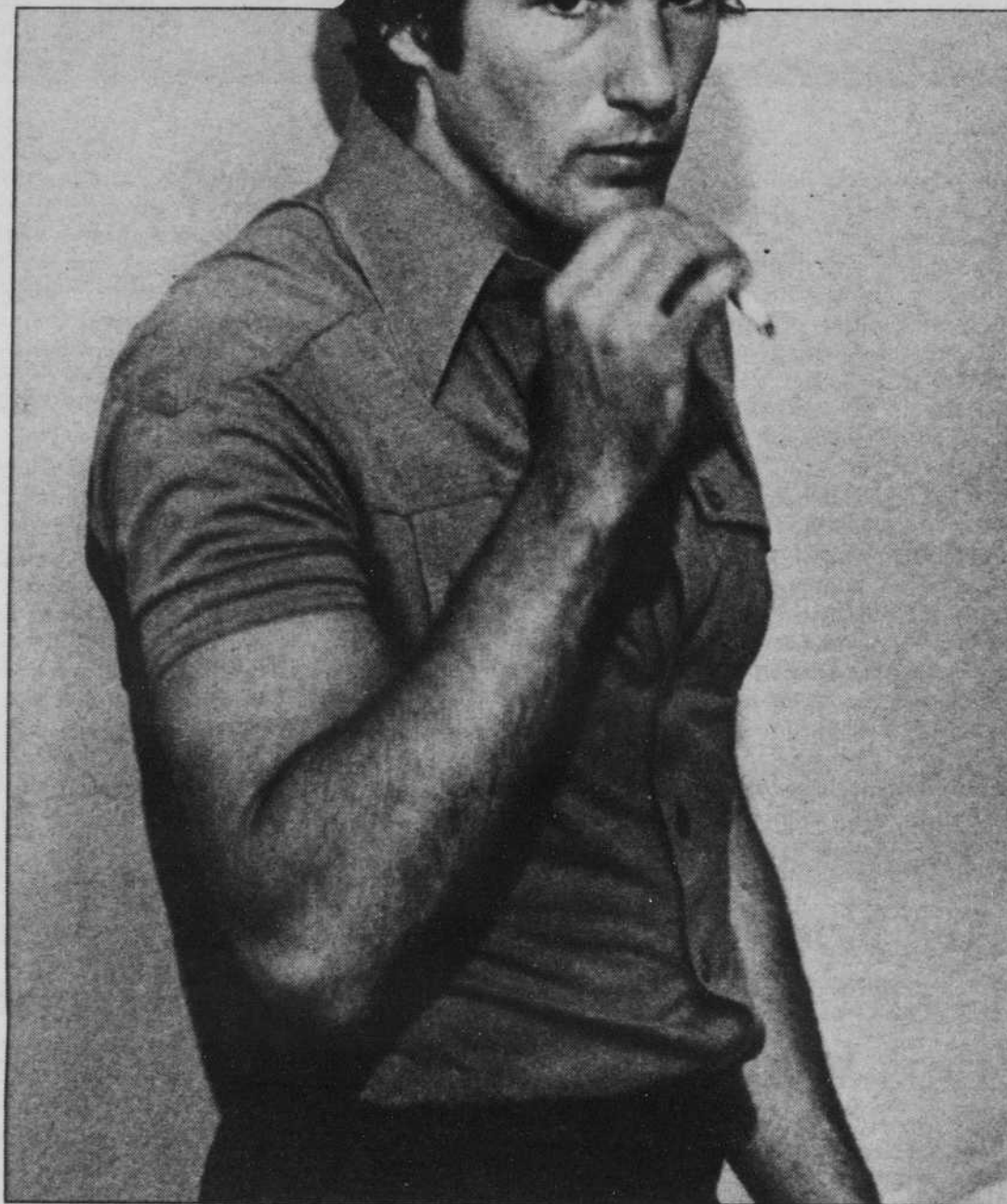
Gere is a forceful, dangerous mystery; Adams, with her unusual face, is sometimes beautiful, sometimes worn and tired, befitting a woman of poverty. Shepard is flawless as the lonely awkward farmer finding his first happiness; Manz, in her acting debut, ties the film together with her New York-accented narration and grave ferret face. A victim of others' circumstances, she survives in spite of them. Each performance is brilliantly subdued; no one person dominates the screen, they are all just people on a landscape, no less compelling for their subordination.

Although it is a short film (about an hour and a half), it sometimes seems like a long epic; still, I didn't want it to end.

Judith Sims

**INTERIORS**, starring Diane Keaton, Richard Jordan, Geraldine Page, E. G. Marshall, Maureen Stapleton, Marybeth Hurt, Sam Waterston, Kristin Griffith; written and directed by Woody Allen.

In his first serious film, Allen has created a vulnerable family full of uninteresting, self-absorbed people. Mother (and interior decorator) Page, separated from wealthy-lawyer father Marshall, is an emotional casualty, shock-treated out of one break-



Richard Gere, starring in *Days of Heaven* and *Bloodbrothers*.

down and heading for another. Their daughters are real drags: Griffith a superficial tv actress; Hurt an untalented, sulking woman who's determined—and expected—to be “creative;” and Keaton, the achiever, a poet with writer's block and a husband (Jordan) who's an unsuccessful novelist, jealous of his wife's acclaim. The only one with no apparent psychological disturbance is Waterston, who lives with Hurt; why he tolerates her endless angst is beyond comprehension. The daughters all act out their love/hate for their parents and each other, complaining endlessly and tiresomely, but aside from Page's fragile grip on sanity, it's difficult to understand what's so terrible about their lives. No wife beating, no alcoholism, no kinky sex, no poverty; just a lot of whining about fulfillment and love's hierarchy. Stapleton, as Marshall's wife-to-be, lights up the last half of the film, and not just because she wears brightly colored dresses—the first sign of color in this neutral-tone film. The dress is as obvious as Stapleton's role—the earthy woman who doesn't think much, she just feels and laughs and dances. Allen must be afraid of his intellectualism, afraid that people who “feel” are somehow more in touch with Life's True Meaning, whatever that is, than are people who “think.” Stapleton is the first dash of fun in the film, likeable as all get-out, but she is a vulgarian, as Hurt claims in anguish. I grew up amid dozens of such vulgarians, and they're not privy to Life's True Mean-

ing. Or much else. It's disappointing that Allen should fall for such a lie.

It's also a bit distressing that Allen has chosen Bergman to imitate, so much so that *Interiors* could be subtitled *Homage To Ingmar*. The Swedish director's films are astringent and controlled, opposite to the self-deprecating Jewish humor of Allen's previous films, but both directors are obsessed with death and alienation; in *Interiors* people are forever closing windows to keep out the world, their cries for help emerging in strangled intellectual chitchat. People stare out of windows or speak directly to the camera; the final shot is textbook Bergman: Keaton and Hurt in profile, staring out a window, joined by Griffith in soft focus background, her head framed by the other two heads.

But we already have one Bergman, we don't really need another. With *Annie Hall* Allen proved he is much more than a gag-writer, he proved he could illuminate a relationship, probe a few psyches...and make us laugh at the same time.

Not even Bergman can do that.

J.S.

**BLOODBROTHERS**, starring Richard Gere, Paul Sorvino, Tony Lo Bianco; written by Walter Newman, based on Richard Price's novel; directed by Robert Mulligan.

Christ, spare me another macho crotch-grabbing back-thumping broad-humping masculine bullshit movie. *Bloodbrothers* is one more in a long line of films that revel in this

he-man buddy crap: *Mean Streets*, *Saturday Night Fever*, *Lords of Flatbush*, *Rocky*, they are all, apparently, trying to tell us something: Italians are assholes.

And in the middle of *Bloodbrothers*' violent emotion (Italians are so volatile, you know), what do we have? A sensitive young man! Stony (Gere) has doubts about the lives led by his macho father (Lo Bianco) and good-time uncle (Sorvino); they want him to join their electricians' union and spend the rest of his life working, drinking and screwing, but Stony suspects *There's More to Life Than This*. He agonizes over his choices for what seems like years, while everyone shouts at him and everyone else, and after shouting they fight, weep, hug, hit or storm out (Italians are so excitable, you know). If Gere weren't clean and handsome and a valiant actor, I'd have stormed out; whatever attention this wretchedly paced, sappily written film commands can be credited to him. Odd, that Travolta should have a strong contender so soon. Ironic, that Gere played Danny Zuko in *Grease* on Broadway. Nice, that we now have two sexy young stars.

J.S.

**MIDNIGHT EXPRESS**, starring Brad Davis, John Hurt and Randy Quaid; written by Oliver Stone; directed by Alan Parker.

In 1970 Billy Hayes taped two kilos of hashish around his waist and headed for the Istanbul airport and a plane back to the U.S. His innocent American arrogance didn't help him; he was snatched and sent to a wretched Turkish prison for four years, which sentence was later changed to life. Hayes escaped in 1975 and wrote a book of his experience, called *Midnight Express*—prison jargon for escape. Now there is a film of the book, and while it is tense and grim, it is not nearly so devastating as it could be.

The problem is Brad Davis—or Billy Hayes, it's hard to tell. While Hayes' punishment exceeded his crime, and while life in a Turkish prison is far from pleasant, I felt no real sorrow for Hayes. As played by Davis, Hayes does little but stare (with crossed eyes), grimace, and weep. We're asked to sympathize with him because he “made a mistake” but he was thrown into prison for his own stupidity and ultimately escaped because of sheer luck. He shows no initiative, no resourcefulness, and certainly no humor. This is not a story of a man's endurance, outwitting the system with unbending pride, like *Papillon*. It is a horror story with no tragic dimensions. It's hard for me to believe that an American abroad in 1970 did not know the fearsome extent of Middle Eastern punishment for dope offenders. The 1960s were full of stories about these unfortunates; still today there are hundreds of Americans languishing in foreign prisons, victims of their own ignorance or greed, their country's indifference, and medieval penal systems.

Director Alan Parker has only one previous feature to his credit, the dreadful *Bugsy Malone*, in which “gangster” kids cavorted oh-so-cutely. *Midnight Express* has no such frivolity; Parker has re-created (on the island of Malta) a realistic, repressive world and peopled it with believably bizarre characters. Hayes' two closest friends in prison are an English junkie (brilliantly played by John Hurt, last seen in this country as Caligula in PBS' *I, Claudius*) and an angry American, Randy Quaid. The production, the script, the supporting players cannot be faulted. It is perhaps a measure of this film's intensity that the Turkish government is trying to suppress *Midnight Express* and succeeded, at the Cannes Film Festival, in preventing the film from winning any awards.

J.S.